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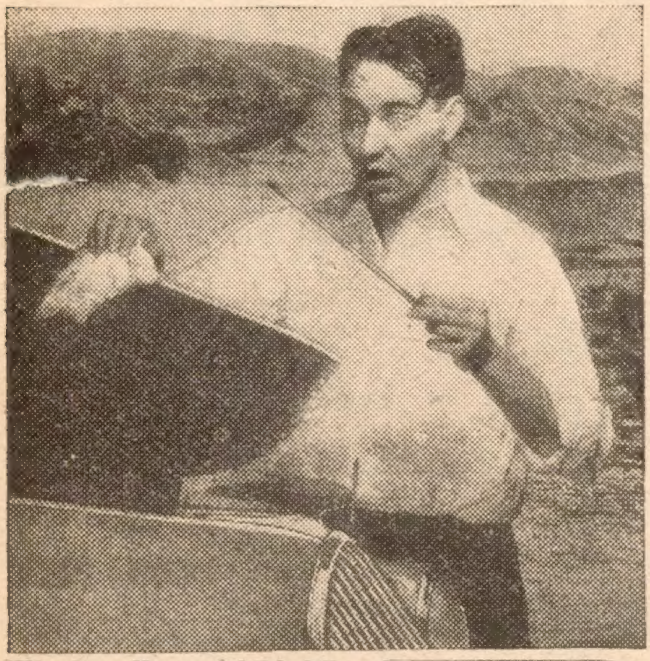

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THRILLING WESTERN

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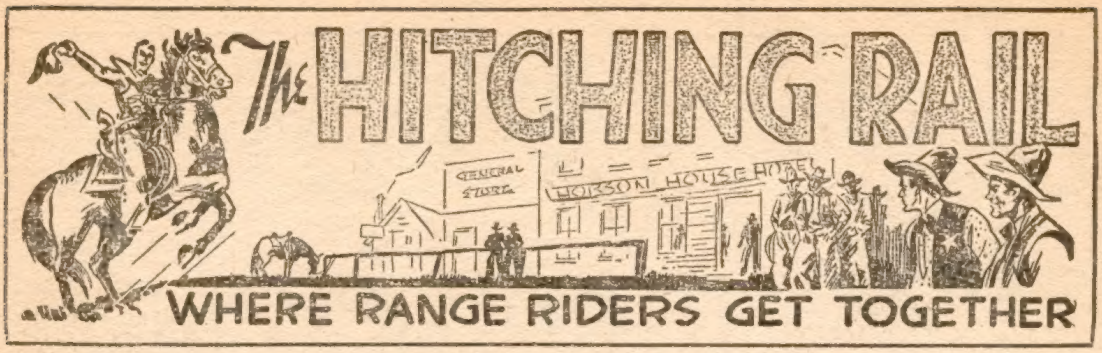

YES, SUH, folks, when a fella or gal rides th' cow country they shore gotta study their weather keen. Don't never pay to jest say it's gonna be all hunky-dory an' sunshine, an' ride forth like couldn't never be no blizzards or sandstorms or cloudbursts.

Them things strikes down sometimes with a durned hard suddenness what'll make yuh know yuh've shore rode through suthin'.

Cowboys all studies th' skies, an' it's shore wonderful what studyin' 'em'll do tuh tell yuh whether or not yuh kin make Rawhide or Naco without bustin' right intuh weather squawls.

Sky-Readin' Hombres

Seems like a rider o' th' range jest gits knowin' what them ol' skies says, an' th' stars an' moon, like they says them sailor folks do when far out at sea an' ain't no Robinson Crusoe island fer 'em to land on an' git under cover o' th' hills an' vales sech island is supposed tuh have handy.

Reminds me o' some o' th' funny stories I've heerd down on th' range, 'bout weather. Most o' our troubles thataway, down in th' Southwest, where I comes from an's shore Gawd's grand country ef yuh asks me, folks; most o' our troubles as riders comes from th' sandstorms more'n from cloudbursts or blizzards, though I'm here tuh tell yuh that when Arizony wants tuh romp loose with them two latter festivities, folks had better git movin' outa that speshul section quick an' not do no lookin' back.

But darn them ol' sandstorms. They kin shore cut yore eyes an' face like coupla billion keen-edged knives, an' they make yuh ride blind, with only now an' then a quick half peek ahaid so's tuh hold tuh th' trail.

That Reminds Me—

One time when Jess Lucas an' me war ridin' fer th' old Diamond A spread what's down in southern Arizony clost tuh th' Mex border. We war 'bout thirty mile from th' ranch, out in th' desert, what war hotter'n hell on a Fourth o' July, when up comes that sandstorm outa nowhere. Th' fifty haid o' fuzz-tails (green broncs from th' wild country) what we war headin' for th 'ranch an' their first home cookin', went haywire pronto, spreadin' out tuh all points o' th' compass an' travelin' some fast, headin' fer th' deep arroyos an' sech places where's some sorta protection agin storms. Broncs an' cows'll do that, plenty times.

There they stands, tails tuh th' wind an' haids down low, an' jest waits fer good weather tuh come rollin' along. An' tuh try tuh drive them critters out intuh th' open an' keep 'em together on a drive is jest one o' them things what cain't be did easy or frequent. No, suh! Sech times, cows an' loose broncs jest gits ornery'n hell. An', havin' bucked many a sandstorm, folks, I ain't blamin' 'em none, no time. Took Jess an' me four days after good weather come back afore we found them pesky fuzzies, an' we shore rode plenty long miles in that round-up him an' me made.

Th' Wind Shore Blows

An' th' wind shore blows durin' them sandstorms. Us fellas on th' Diamond A tried tuh skin outa havin' tuh ride when a bad one came along. Then we got thinkin' our boss war tender-hearted to'ard us an' willin' we should stick in th' bunkhouse come such a storm.

Reckon we sorta took advantage o' him thataway, takin' too danged many layoffs when th' sandstorms warn't really humdingers. So he fixes up a contrapshun what'd tell us when he figgered th' storm war too bad fer us tuh ride in. That war shore some swell invention—I don't think.

He tied a lariat 'round a twenty-pound rock an' hung th' thing to one o' our barbed-wire fence posts an' tells us, "Boys, when that rock's bein' blowed out horizontal an' held thataway by th' wind, yuh needn't ride out that day."

A Tourist Party

I 'member time some tourists stopped overnight at th' ranch, from back East somewheres. Th' boss told us all tuh be nice to 'em, an' th' gals in th' party bein' plenty sweet-lookin', that warn't hard tuh do. Protectin' femininity is a right proper job fer any cowpoke, any time. But us fellas shore had a tough time holdin' back chuckles when we hears one o' them tourists ask our boss if we ever had cyclones out in our range country an' heerd 'im reply:

"No, suh, folks, we never have them

(Continued on page 8)

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Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning; shows my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a post card—NOW.

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Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

sorta things down yere. One time coupla years back, one tried comin' our way, but it run head-on intuh one o' our sandstorms an' war whipped all tuh pieces. Ain't no cyclone tried it since."

Fool Questions

An' that boss shore knowed replies tuh strangers who asked 'bout our customs o' ranchin'. Onct, when uh eastern tourin' party comes rompin' along, askin' all sorts o' them fool questions us cowboys hears, th' tourists notices how our cows is all branded plain on their hides.

One fella speaks up an' says, "But when you sell yore cattle, Mister, how do you get that brand off so the new owner can put on his own?"

Our boss studies fer a split second only, an' then he passes back this yere reply: "That's plumb easy, folks. We jest drives th' bought herd through Naco Pass, what's down on our south range. Th' sandstorms is allers blowin' hard through th' pass, an' when our cows comes out at th' far end, th' sandstorm plumb sandpapered th' old brand off complete, leavin' a clean, bare spot fer th' new owner's brandin' iron."

Ef any o' yuh've ever rode through that pass, what lays between Culbertson's Ranch an' Lang's Ranch, down in southwest New Mexico an' agin th' Arizony line, yuh know how th' durned wind's allers rippin' through it like it wanted tuh scrape th' hide off'n th' world in general.

It Ripped Off the Barbs

Why, one time, a sandstorm blowed through there so durned hard that it ripped off all th' barbs from th' wire fences, carried them barbs four miles tuh where was a sorta swampy few acres an' packed them barbs down there so danged tight we've had good footin' tuh ride over ever since.

Dandy Letters

Well, fellas an' gals, let's git lookin' over some o' th' fine letters yere on my desk, stackin' higher'n higher ev'ry time th' mail-boy comes lopin' past. Shore's good tuh git so many dandy letters from our readers. Th' more th' merrier. Let 'em roll!

Yere's one from Tommy Walker o' San Diego, Californy, where th' Navy's gittin' spruced up fer whatever th' yaller horde over 'crost th' Pacific's figgerin' doin' tuh us some fine day. I been there, Tommy, an' shore saw lotsa pretty flowers an' trees an' green grass an' gals. I'll say so!

Saddle Weight

Tommy asks what's th' weight o' various kindsa saddles. Well, son, them racin' saddles what jockeys uses runs 'bout three-four pounds or little heavier, like postage stamps our gov'mint's allers changin' so's we'll know our history good. I ain't never sat in one o' them, though, me bein' too danged ample o' form. Need room when I sits down. But in races ev'ry pound counts. Them li'l monkey-jockeys don't never weigh much more'n a hundred pounds, dressed fer markit.

Th' Regular Army, it uses th' McClellan saddle since th' Civil War, what ain't no better made fer durability, lightness an' packin' qualities. It weighs seventeen pounds, stripped fer ordinary ridin', an' when packed fer field service, complete, weighs ninety-one and a half pounds. 'Course yuh gotta add tuh that th' weight o' th' rider, what'll average 'round a good hundred an' sixty pounds. So th' cavalry bronc has tuh lug along, all day an' ev'ry day, suthin' 'round two hundred an' fifty pounds. That's some load, son. An' th' cavalryman don't have no "string" o' five-six broncs as his own.

He has jest th' one hoss an' must make it last through th' campaign, an' in all weather. Yuh kin buy a McClellan fer 'bout fifteen plunks.

Officers in our Army and all cavalry in England an' Europe cottons tuh a flat saddle what weighs, stripped, 'round thirty pounds, but when they packs 'em fer field service, th' poundage leaps up 'bout equal tuh our'n. Only, th' best flat saddles cain't hold a candle fer durability tuh our McClellan, what'll last thirty years or more, ef took good care of.

A first-class flat saddle does well tuh

(Continued on page 10)

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Try my Coffee Agency Plan for 30 days. See for yourself the big money making possibilities. Under my plan you don't risk a penny in trying the business. No training course is required; no long wait before you begin making money—your earnings start the very first day. The business is very simple to handle; you just follow, step by step, the proved plan that has brought immediate success to hundreds of others like yourself. Simply make the regular calls on your customers, deliver their orders and pocket your fine cash profits. Once you are started, you can order stocks of goods on credit, and thus build your business on my capital. In addition to your own big cash profits, I offer you a new Ford car or $500.00 cash as a bonus or extra reward.

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Unless you get my wonderfully simple, sure-fire Coffee Agency Plan, you will never know what you may be missing! Costs nothing to get the facts; no obligation. My offer has proved a Godsend for scores of men and women. Mail the application blank at once, or just rush a penny postcard. DO IT TODAY!

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 8)

last one hard campaign; though, privately owned an' cared for in ordinary ridin', it'll last several years—not much longer. An' good ones shore costs like hell—fifty, sixty dollars an' up, with mostly up.

Th' Cowboy's Equipment

Th' cowboy rides a forty-pound horned saddle, as yuh knows. He generally has a "string" o' several broncs which he alternates ridin' from day tuh day; durin' round-ups, from hour tuh hour, swappin' around tuh fresh mounts when needed. A good stock (cowboy) saddle'll put yuh back 'bout forty dollars an' up, again with th' accent muchly on th' UP.

They last a lifetime an' kin be packed pretty good with bed-blanket, grub an' ammunition an' tobacco an' sech. With th' cowboy averagin' 'round hundred an' eighty pounds, his broncs carries a right good load, Tommy, as yuh kin see, an' th' ridin's shore fast an' hard, come times. Takes good broncs tuh stand up an' last.

Our Next Number

Well, folks, answerin' Tommy this time has give a heap o' yuh info what yuh've been writin' in about, so we gotta cut down tuh th' core o' this space now an' tell yuh about our next number, what's gonna make yuh sit up straight in yore kaks an' claw fer leather, ahootin' gleeful ev'ry buck o' yore bronc.

They's gonna be GUNFIRE DEAL, a novel of range tragedy, by Johnston McCulley, that old ranny what never throws yuh down, no time. An' FREIGHT FOR SANTA FE, a novelet of pioneer trails, by 'nother jest as knowin' what ridin' through all sortsa weather means, J. Allan Dunn. Then they's gonna be HARD TO KILL, a novelet of rustler guns, by that danged swell high-bucker, Tom Gunn; an' we're givin' yuh a lot more jest as *bueno*, by writin' folks yuh all likes.

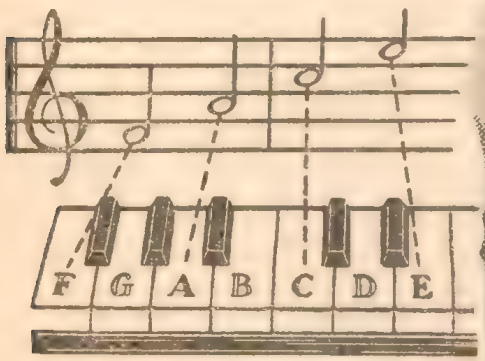
Don't miss that new number, fellas an' gals, or yuh'll sorta feel lost An' ef yuh ain't rode intuh our RANGE RIDERS' CLUB yit, spurs a-rakin' fill out th' coupon an' mail it tuh us, enclosin' a self-addressed an' stamped return envelope for yore free membership cyard, an' git ridin' alongside o' us quick. Room fer plenty more bronc-twistin' humans, any time, an' yuh'll shore like us.

Hope yuh've done squinted through our SWAP COLUMN, too, an' found suthin' appealin' tuh yore special fancy. Git sendin' in yore swaps, folks.

Till next month, ev'rybody, here's lookin' at yuh an'—*salud y pesetas, companeros mio.*

Buck Benson

To those who think LEARNING MUSIC is hard...



PERHAPS *you* think that taking music lessons is like taking a dose of medicine. It isn't any longer!

As far as you're concerned, the old days of long practice hours with their scales and hard-work exercises and expensive personal teacher fees are over and done with.

You have no excuses—no alibi whatsoever for not making your start toward musical good times *now!*

For, through a method that removes the boredom and extravagance from music lessons, you can now learn to play your favorite instrument entirely at home—without a private teacher—in an amazingly short time—at a fraction of the usual cost.

Just imagine . . . a method that has made the reading and playing of music so downright simple that you don't have to know one note from another to begin.

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The lessons come to you by mail from the famous U. S. School of Music. They consist of complete printed instructions, diagrams, and all the music you need. You study with a smile. One week you are learning a dreamy waltz—the next you are mastering a stirring march. As the lessons continue they prove easier and easier. For instead of just scales you are always learning to play by *actual* notes the classic favorites and the latest syncopation that formerly you only *listened* to.

And you're never in hot water. First, you are told how a thing is done. Then a picture shows you how, then you do it yourself and hear it. No private teacher could make it clearer or easier.

Soon, when your friends say "please play something," you can surprise and entertain them with pleasing melodies on your favorite instrument. You'll find yourself in the spotlight—popular everywhere. Life at last will have its silver lining and lonely hours will vanish as you play the "blues" away.

NEW FRIENDS—BETTER TIMES

If you're tired of doing the heavy looking-on at parties—if always listening to others play has almost spoiled the pleasure of music for you—if you've been envious because they could entertain their friends and family—if learning music has always been one of those never-to-come-true dreams, let the time-proven and tested home-study method of the U. S. School of Music come to your rescue.

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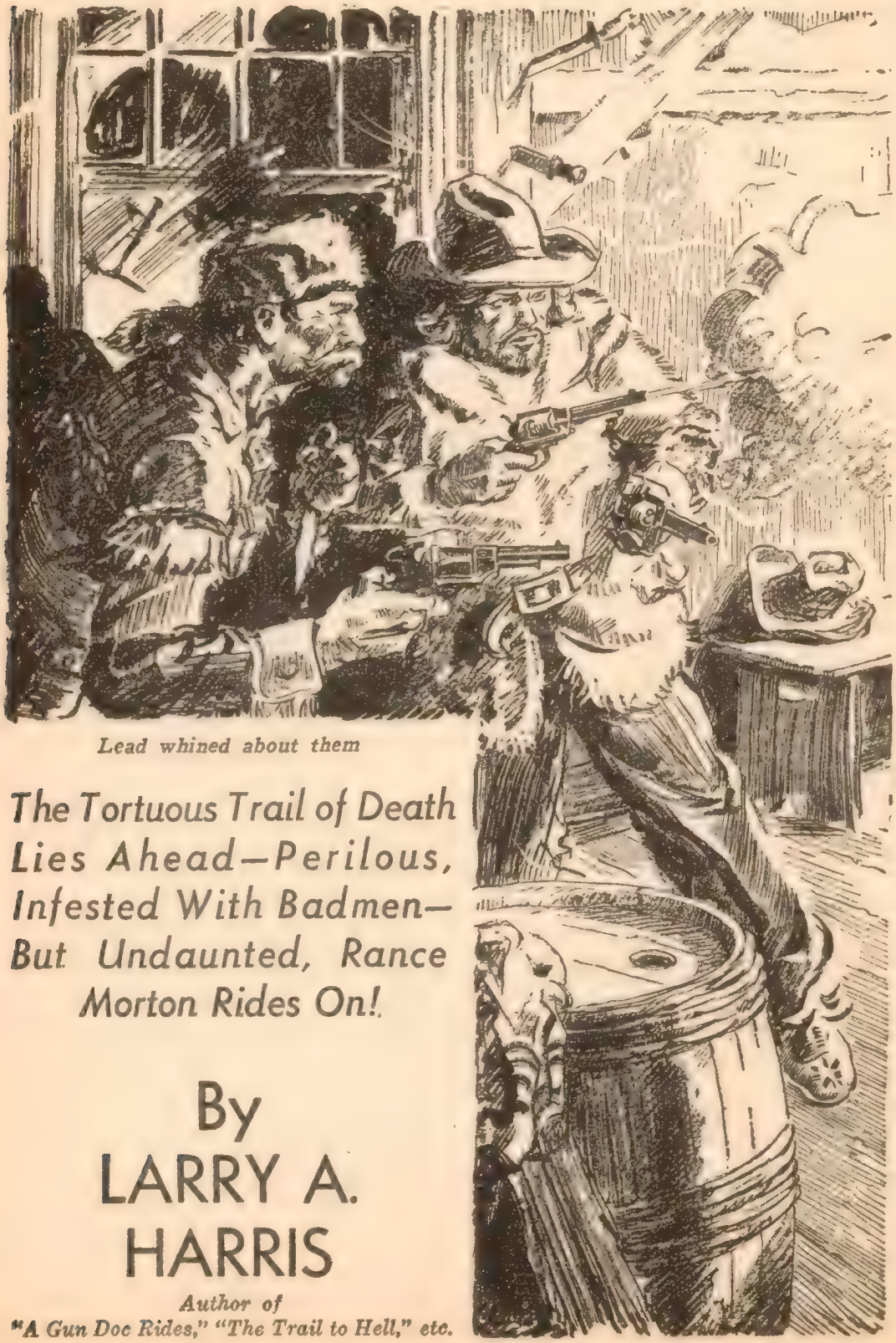

Lead whined about them

The Tortuous Trail of Death Lies Ahead—Perilous, Infested With Badmen—But Undaunted, Rance Morton Rides On!

By
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PASSAGE

A Complete Novel

CHAPTER I

Death on the Jornada

JUST at dark, Rance Morton pulled in his double span of mules on a high roll. The lurching, creaking, covered wagon came to a halt. Building a smoke, Morton studied the night-gloomed expanse of brushy wasteland stretching out below him. It was like an endless black sea, sinister, uninviting. Far off to the north the Fra Cristobals towered up out of the shadows like black monuments to those who had died attempting to reach their haven of security.

Like others who had braved this hellish stretch, Rance Morton felt awed by the grandeur of the distant mountains. Felt a tingle of chill at the threat of danger it presented.

Back of him lay the Rio Grande and verdant Mesilla Valley. Ahead lay ninety miles of sand-swept, waterless desert. A fierce, raw, untamed land that the Spanish *Conquistadores* had trailed two centuries ago, building their missions.

Those holy men of the brown cloth were gone now, their missions crumbling. But this desolate trail they had cut through the mesquite was here, a sinuous, cleared strip through the brush, flanked by lonely unmarked graves of those who never survived its tortuous length.

"Jornada del Muerte," Morton murmured grimly. "Trail of death. Get along, mulies, we'll make it."

It was sweltering hot. The four mules strained against the tugs. The wagon lurched forward down the slope. Water in the barrels strapped to the sides of the wagon slopped over the edges.

A MILE ahead, Morton spotted the pool of shadow that would be his small bedded herd. One-eyed Sully Northrup, who had been riding point all day, had called a halt in a clearing to one side of the trail.

The beckoning light of a small campfire sprang up out of the darkness down there. Morton discerned the familiar figure of his young brother who was near the fire preparing supper. And Morton thrilled to the courage of his brother Tag and Sully Northrup.

Three days ago when Morton had told them he was pulling stakes, heading north for a new start, you couldn't have held either of them back with a span of oxen. Yet both of them knew the dangers they were facing. Even Tag, who was only a freckled-faced kid of sixteen.

As Morton tooled the lumbering wagon nearer the fire he spied his brother riding to overtake him. The kid's levis were grey with dust, his face pale with fatigue. But he could still grin. Across the swell of his saddle he clutched his long-barreled rifle. He wheeled in beside the wagon, rode back slowly toward the herd where Sully Northrup was waiting for them.

"Ol' Rance the water boy!" Tag whooped, laughing. "An' you was the one that told me to watch out fer McDowell an' his cutthroats. Shucks, Rance, yuh're boogery. McDowell wouldn't ride out here for our small pickin's." He snorted. "Fifty head of white-faces an' a wagon-load of belongings."

Rance Morton grinned at the kid. He drew in near the fire. "Jest pays to be careful, Tag. Two more days of this hot hell an' then the pine country."

Two more days—then the pine country and a new start. Somewhere in a fertile valley this side of Santa Fe, they'd homestead. It was all a wonderful adventure, especially to Tag Morton.

As Morton leaped down from the wagon Sully Northrup limped up, helped him unspan the teams while Tag unloaded the grub and blankets.

"I'm hungry as a holed-up bear, Rance," he grumbled good-naturedly. "Let's eat an' git the fire stomped out. Too hot fer a fire. I'll take the first hitch at nighthawkin'."

Old Sully Northrup's one good eye avoided Morton. And Morton wondered. There was a strange note of uneasiness about Sully that he was failing to conceal. It only served to stir deeper in Morton the uncanny feeling of uneasiness that he had felt since the coming of darkness.

But Morton said nothing until he and Sully were alone. They were hobbling the mules beyond the circle of firelight.

"You cut any danger sign today, Sully?" Morton asked softly.

In the darkness, Sully looked up at Morton.

"Nary a sign, son."

Morton knew when this oldster was lying. And he knew now that Sully was holding something from him.

"What'd yuh find, Sully?" Morton asked grimly.

Sully looked about uneasily into the gloom, fingering the handle of his bowie. "Might as well tell yuh, Rance. Didn't want to booger the kid because I mighta been wrong. But about an hour ago I skylined a rider."

"A white man?"

"A white man," said Sully. "Let the kid git some shut-eye. But you an' me, Rance, we'd best keep our eyes peeled."

Morton nodded grimly. Without another word they strode back to the campfire where Tag was singing as he cooked supper. Tall, wide-shouldered, Rance Morton hunkered down, watched the two men prepare the food. In the firelight his blue-grey eyes were narrow with thought, shadowed by the brim of his flat-crowned hat. His tanned face was hard.

"Rance, yuh look like yuh was settin' on some cactus."

Morton started, forcing a grin. He had hardly been aware that Tag was talking.

"Jest hungry, kid," he said quietly.

After that, Morton and Tag ate their meal in silence for the most part. Hot steak, boiled potatoes and warmed-over frijoles. Sully Northrup did most of the talking. He was a wiry little oldster. Where his right eye should have been was but a healed-over scar—the result of an Indian arrow.

Sully wore a fringed buckskin suit and a coonskin hat atop his head. He growled and swore and always had a small jug of whiskey strapped to his saddle-horn. But faults and all, Rance Morton liked the old buffalo hunter and wagon train guide. He knew he could trust Sully. One night in a drunken saloon brawl in Franklin, Morton had saved the old hellion's life. Since then, Sully Northrup had trailed Rance Morton everywhere he went.

"Now speakin' of Injuns an' renegades, Tag. By gumie, I've saw 'em, I have. I fit the Tonkawas an' the Lipans 'fore Texas was ever a republic. I whittled greasers with me old bowie here, whuppin' 'em at their own game." He paused, took a long swig from his half gallon jug. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "An' by gunnie, son, if it warn't fer this gut-heatin' likker I'd be gov'nor some day!"

HE talked on, eyes dropping to the rifle at his side. He avoided looking at Morton across the fire from him. Tag, stretched out on the ground near him, lay full fed and content, listening, as a kid will.

But even as Sully talked, Morton stiffened to a new sound. Through the low moan of the bedded herd off in the darkness struck a low rumble. Sully quit talking, his gaze leaping to Morton. The kid sat up, eyes thinning. With the lithe quick movements of a panther, Morton came to his feet, made a dash for his rifle against the wagon wheel.

"Rance!" shrilled Tag. "Them's riders—comin' this way!"

"By, gumie, boys! *It's McDowell!*"

As if Sully Northrup's warning shout had been the signal for attack, it came! Blasting rifles ripped wide the night. Thundering horsebackers loomed up out of the darkness, firing, yelling like men gone mad. Out of the brush, straight toward the fire they charged. Off in the inky gloom the herd was stampeding.

Stunned by the suddenness of the attack, Morton whirled, crouched, the Walker six-guns at his sides

sweeping up into his hands, spewing death at the hulking figures bearing down on him. He saw Sully on his knees, triggering his rifle, his cursing lost in the bedlam. Near him was Tag, face a white mask, a long-barreled rifle at his shoulder.

"Tag!" Norton yelled desperately. "You an' Sully! Git out of the firelight."

But Tag didn't move. Lead sang about him, kicked up the fire beside him. Oblivious of danger, Morton dashed toward him, still flinging loads at the swerving riders. Then out of the blur, Morton saw the boy's face jerk toward him, a startled, wild look of horror in his eyes.

"Rance! Rance!"

Above the tumult his voice rose to a stricken cry. He began kneeling as Morton reached him. Knife in hand now, Sully was leaping out into the brush, his shrill cry lifting above the firing. The horsebackers were circling for the inevitable kill.

"Give 'em hell, boys! Never was no good with a rifle! Me fer the pistol an' bowie. We'll whup 'em!"

Sully didn't look back. He hadn't seen Tag fall. But now Morton had the boy in his arms, was sprinting toward the ring of black brush.

"Rance! They—got—me! Rance!"

IN THAT terrible moment, Morton glanced down, saw the dark crimson spot on Tag's flannel shirt front. And quiet-mannered, soft-spoken Rance Morton went mad. Tear-blinded, he slid to a halt a hundred feet from the firelight. Laying Tag down upon the ground, he rose and began shooting again at the dim figures of the hemming circle of horsebackers.

Lead plucked the mesquite about him. But Rance Morton remained unmoved, his bucking guns taking toll. With each buck of his guns he cursed the name of Killer McDowell. Sully had disappeared, was probably dead by now. Tag was dying.

Then Morton's guns were empty. Still he stood, his broad shoulders slumped. Out of his dazed eyes he watched the renegades swoop past, their rifles like blazing torches. He was afraid to look down at Tag. A rider was passing within a few feet of him. Savagely, Morton flung his guns at the rider even as a red flame of pain seared his mind.

Slowly, like a mortally wounded animal, Morton sank into the thick brush. Blood blinded him and strength poured out of him. For what seemed hours he lay upon the prairie sod beside Tag. Then summoning the last iota of his draining strength, Morton pulled himself up to his hands and knees. Through a swimming red haze he saw the boy's stark eyes upon him. Appealing, pain-shot eyes looked into his.

"Rance," Tag whispered. "You've been more—than a brother, Rance—"

A sob in his throat, Morton somehow managed to get Tag over his back. On hands and knees he began crawling farther and farther away from the dimming fire. Back of him now rose the jubilant, hoarse yells of the raiders as they reached the wagon.

Still Morton crawled on, his head slumped low. On through the black brush that rose high as a horse's head. Some instinctive urge kept pulling him on to safety. He felt the warm blood trickle down his cheek. Felt the heavy burden of Tag's limp body on his back.

After what seemed hours, Morton was dimly conscious of crawling down a rocky bank. Sharp-edged stones cut his hands, but he felt no pain. Like a drowning man he clung to the last vestige of consciousness, fought desperately against the ache of his steely muscles.

Overhead in the starlit heavens a red half-moon shone down upon the

brush and the sand and the faltering, crawling movements of Rance Morton. Back of him a quarter mile a high torch of flame leaped skyward. It was the wagon burning, its yellow light revealing a dozen heavily armed men riding off into the night.

But Morton didn't see all that. Exhausted, he fell flat in the sand, lay there for several moments with his eyes closed. When he reached up to pull Tag off him he touched Tag's hand. It was cold. Through

a blur of tears he stared down into the boy's pallid face. Tag's eyes were closed. There was a faint smile upon his lips.

A damning sense of helplessness swept over Rance Morton. The full shock of his grief struck him, tearing a bitter, half-sobbed curse past his lips. Grief he had known before. But now even deeper than grief was born a new emotion that had never been an essential part of his make-up. Hate! Hate for the cutthroat renegades who had robbed him of his only brother.

Like a man praying, Morton lifted his blood-stained face. The moonlight shone in his dimming eyes.

"I'll kill McDowell," he whispered huskily. "I'll kill him an' his men somehow!"

His voice broke. He sank to the ground beside Tag there, not so far west of the Jornada del Muerte, while waves of pain engulfed his body and mind and blessed darkness swept down upon him—

CHAPTER II

Morton Takes a Job

IN the chill before dawn, Morton opened his eyes into a world of horrible reality. Without moving, he lay staring into the stark, dead face of his young brother, while the devilish nightmare of the night's happenings galloped through his mind.

Then conscious of his own aching body, Morton pulled himself to his feet. His throat was parched, lips dry. With probing fingers he felt of the bullet crease across his forehead. Dried blood matted his long blond hair, stiffened the side of his face.

To the east the red hot ball of the morning sun was just topping the tumbled barren Caballos Mountains. A purplish mistlike haze hung low over the mesquite.

Reeling slightly, Morton trailed back over the furrow he had left in the sand. The smell of smoke stung his nostrils. The sun had risen by the time he reached the smoldering ruins of the covered wagon. Horses' hoofs had churned the dirt. Half-burned belongings that had been in the wagon lay in a heap. The cattle had been driven away, the mules with them.

From the wreckage, Morton picked out a blanket, a broken shovel. Near the cold ashes of the campfire lay a filled canteen. Morton drank deeply. Then with the supplies under his arm he searched through the brush for an hour or more.

"Sully!" he called. "Sully!"

But there was no answer. Only the desolate loneliness of the desert. Not a living soul was in sight. Not a man's body any place. Yet Morton was positive that some of McDowell's renegades had fallen. He had seen them. Undoubtedly Sully

had been killed. Somewhere off in the shifting sands, McDowell and his men had likely buried the bodies.

AFTER washing and dressing his wound the best he could, Morton returned to the arroyo where he had left Tag's body. On a high sandy mound he dug a grave. He rolled Tag into the blanket.

Grief tore at Morton's heart as he scooped in the sand. His throat ached and each movement he made was an effort. From the arroyo he carried rocks to put over the sandy mound. At the head of the grave he stuck the broken shovel. It was the best he could do now. Later—

Morton knelt beside the grave, a powerfully-built young fellow in faded, dust-smeared denims, humbling himself in the presence of a power stronger than man's—Death! He couldn't hold back the tears. He had loved Tag, cared for him since their parents had died years ago.

"Help me, God," Morton murmured hoarsely. "Help me to live long enough to even things with Killer McDowell!"

The sun rose higher. It was sweltering hot. Stiffly, Morton rose. Like a man in a trance, he walked back through the high brush to the trail. Then he followed the wagon tracks he had made the day before.

He lost track of time. Noon came and passed, but Morton kept walking, stumbling at times. Out of his slitted, bloodshot eyes he kept peering through the heat waves at the endless, winding trail ahead. Twice he paused to lift the canteen to his lips.

Toward nightfall he topped a hump in the trail, peered down at the river below him. Only a man of steel and rawhide could have made the trip.

Sleep, weariness tugged at his eyes, but he didn't stop. Down there green cottonwoods and willows flanked the river. The smell of growing things rode the warm evening breeze.

Morton followed the course of the river. Darkness came and a tawny moon peered down upon the stumbling figure. His head was slumped down on his chest, and much of the time he had no recollection of walking.

Suddenly he looked up with a start. Not far ahead the feeble lights of Santa Ana twinkled. A cluster of 'dobe huts took shape in the moonlight. Heedless of the Mexicans who stared at him from darkened doorways, Morton made his way to a *cantina*.

Tag Morton

When he pushed through the swinging doors, the pock-marked Mexican barkeep stared at him as if face to face with a ghost. A card game in one corner of the room stopped as the swart-skinned players looked up.

"Senor!" gasped the fat barman.

"A drink—and food," Morton told him in Spanish.

Silence in the *cantina* hung heavy while Morton ate his *enchiladas*. Awed, the Mexican barkeep studied

his trail-dusty figure, looked into Morton's eyes and read the mingled emotions of grief and hate.

"You, Senor," the Mexican ventured, puzzledly. "You and two other men were the ones who camped in Santa Ana only two nights ago, *es verdad?* And now you are back—on foot—alone."

"The other two men are dead," Morton told him. "Killer McDowell murdered them."

"Killer McDowell!" whispered the Mexican. Fear widened his eyes. "Ah, but *Dios,* Senor. I understand. It is not the first time he has struck death on the Jornada del Muerte." He crossed himself. "Like the eagles, McDowell and his *pelados* sweep out of their hidden valley in the Caballos. They are evil, merciless, Senor. Only will peace come when they are dead."

"They will die," Morton said briefly. "I shall kill them."

His saying that wasn't bragging. The barkeep saw the lights in the depths of Morton's eyes and shivered.

"I want a horse, Senor," Morton continued. "That I may ride. I shall return in a few days. Whoever lends the horse has but my word."

"A man's word is all that is necessary," said the Latin wisely. "I have two horses, you may have one."

IN FIFTEEN minutes, Morton had his canteen refilled and was ready to leave. The Mexican barkeep had a horse waiting for him at the door, a blanket and a sack of jerky with *tortillas* tied to the cantle. Morton mounted tiredly, waved to the fat Mexican who stood in the lighted doorway.

"Vaya con Dios," Morton said quietly.

"Con Dios," murmured the Mexican.

A mile out of town, Morton pulled off into a brushy thicket near the whispering river. He made dry camp, rolled up in his blanket. Every muscle of his body quivered with fatigue. Yet when he closed his eyes he couldn't sleep.

Memories roweled him—some bitter; some pleasant. The image of Tag flashed before him, then Sully Northrup. Morton rolled, slept fitfully for a time. Then he was wide awake again, recalling the farewells given him back in Franklin. The vision of beautiful Helen Stockton came to him. It had been a strangely cool good-by Helen had given him—a fact which had rankled him at first.

But Morton had hardly been away from Helen Stockton an hour before he overlooked her cool farewell for her other dazzling qualities. A wonderful girl was Helen, niece of old Hub Stockton, Morton's close friend. Exacting perhaps, but what girl wasn't? Helen had always had her own way with old Hub. And when she learned that Morton's plan to move couldn't be altered, she had pouted, a sly artifice that always made her the more desirable.

"You'll be so far away, Rance," she had told him. "It's a wild, dangerous land where you're going. I wish you'd stay."

Rance Morton had laughed to allay her fears. "Nothin' to worry about, honey," he soothed. "Once I get up there an' get settled, you'll be comin' up—as my wife. An' you'll love it."

Her uncle, Hub Stockton, knew that if Helen couldn't change Rance Morton's mind *he* couldn't. The morning Morton pulled out the two men's hands met in a firm clasp of friendship.

"Just like yore pa, Rance," the oldster grumbled affectionately. "Once yore mind is made up all hell couldn't change yuh. Mebbe it is for the best. There is good pasture up around Santa Fe. Keerful of that

damned Death Trail gettin' there, an' watch out for that renegade, Killer McDowell. He's robbin' about half the wagons that make that trip. Wish you'd stay here an' help us with the new freight line Ricker an' me's startin'."

It was a wonderful opportunity, he told Morton. He and Galt Ricker were getting in on the ground floor. Theirs would be the first regular freight line between Franklin and Santa Fe. One wagon would go through each week, using the sixty miles short-cut—the Jornada del Muerte.

IT WASN'T Morton's inherent dislike for Galt Ricker that made him refuse the offer of freight driver. It was simply that he liked the cow business better.

Rance Morton finally slept like a man drugged. At dawn he was up, stretching the stiffness from his muscles. After a cold breakfast he was back in the saddle, heading south.

He skirted the sleepy little village of Mesilla, staying in sight of the Rio Grande. The sun rose high in a cloudless sky. Toward noon, he halted in a willow thicket to rest his horse and chew on a strip of jerky. Insects hummed in the sweltering silence.

A whispering breeze played through the cottonwood trees. In a nearby blackberry grove the horse nibbled at salt grass.

Then Morton mounted and rode on. Sometime during the middle of the afternoon he spotted a signal fire off to his left in the Organs. Comanches! Fierce enemies of the white man who fought bitterly against the invasion of their hunting grounds.

Morton was glad when the purple shadows of evening began daubing the rugged slopes of the Sierra Madres ahead. Depressed, weary, he wondered what the future held for him. With the loss of his herd he was wiped out. All his goods had been burned with the wagon. Tag was dead. And Sully Northrup. In one savage stroke, Killer McDowell and his renegades had shattered all his dreams and hopes. For with nothing to offer her, Morton knew that Helen Stockton would never be his.

Plagued with the injustice of his lot, Morton could make no definite

Galt Ricker

plans. Killing McDowell and his renegades was all that mattered to him now. But that was a chore that even the military in Santa Fe had failed to do. For one man to consider the job seemed foolhardy.

Out of the tumbled, barren hills, Morton rode into Franklin long after nightfall. Like yellow jewels, the lights of the scattered 'dobe village first leaped into view from a hilltop. Like a winding black ribbon the Rio Grande knifed its way through the pass. Just south of the river El Paso del Norte, later to be Juarez, lay silent, grim, a Mexican village in whose narrow black lanes knives often flashed. Two villages, flying different flags. Yet both hug-

ging the river, their peoples united in thought and creed, seeking the protection their numbers offered against the dangers of the rugged hills and the far-flung desert around them.

Mexicans lounged in the deep gloom of the buildings flanking the main street in Franklin. Men jostled in and out of saloons, whiskey talk mingling with sibilant Spanish and sing-song Chinese. Spurs chimed and boot-heels clumped along the packed dirt in front of the false-fronted buildings and low-roofed 'dobes.

From one saloon came the crack of a gunshot, the shrill scream of a woman. Then harsh laughter and gibberish, excited talk. Saddled horses, buckboards lined the hitch-racks. Somewhere a guitar tinkled a love song of old Mexico. From the Guadalupe Mission came the distant toll of the bell.

But to this seething turbulence along the street, Morton paid little heed. Tragedy gloomed his thoughts. It was with a feeling of reluctance that he was returning.

A block beyond the center of the teeming town, he reined over in front of a two-story frame building. The windows in front shone with light. Over the door a newly-painted sign shone dimly:

STOCKTON AND RICKER
FREIGHTERS

Morton dismounted. Stiffly, he strode to the door, opened it. Two men sat at desks, working over papers. They didn't look up at first. Then one of them turned, came slowly to his feet. He was a chubby little man, grey-haired, firm-jawed.

"Rance!" he gasped.

"Howdy, Hub."

Quiet, deadly, was Morton's voice. He stood there with his back against the door. Fluttery rays from the kerosene ceiling lamp shadowed his gaunt, haggard face. Above the bandanna about his forehead his blond hair was tousled, dust-grimed. Out of his bloodshot eyes he watched Hub Stockton come closer.

"My God, Rance!" Stockton fairly yelled. "What's the matter? What's happened?"

He gripped Morton's hand. But Morton found it hard to explain. By the desk he saw Galt Ricker rise to his feet like a man with a knife in his back. His dark-skinned face looked grey, black eyes wide with surprise.

Galt Ricker was a man of thirty, suave, sleek, educated. A bullet had at one time seared his right cheek, leaving a white scar. This handsome, one-time gambler had a flare for flashy clothes and two-color boots. That he had wormed his way into the good graces, and thus into the doubtful esteem of Hub Stockton, had nettled Rance Morton.

Now Galt Ricker was striding forward, hand outstretched. It was a long-fingered hand, white, clammy. Morton accepted it with little feeling of friendship.

"Look like you'd been through hell, Morton."

"I have, Ricker," Morton said tonelessly. "An' Tag is dead."

"Dead?" echoed Ricker.

MORTON saw the forced look of sympathy come to Ricker. He was glad Ricker said nothing else. He didn't want any of this man's mealy-mouthed condolences. It was different with Hub Stockton.

"Come set down, Rance," Stockton urged softly. "Tell me—"

They sat down in chairs near the two desks. Briefly, Morton told what had happened. In the silence that followed the muted noises from the street filtered into them. Hub Stockton rose to his feet. There was a mist in his eyes. His fat face was hard. He paced to the door and back.

"What are yore plans now, Rance?" he asked gently.

"I have none, Hub." Morton struggled to keep his voice steady. "I wanted yuh to know that I'll be headin' north soon on McDowell's trail. Killin' him is all that matters now."

"Rather a big job you're undertaking, Morton," Ricker said smoothly.

"Mebbe."

Morton rose. Hub Stockton gripped his arms. "Steady, son," he said warmly. "Hearin' the news cuts me deep. You an' Tag have been like my own boys."

"I know, Hub."

"That job of freight driver me'n Ricker offered yuh still stands, Rance," old Stockton continued. "Yuh're one man that can get through. Yore pa wheeled the old Butterfield Trail when they said it couldn't be done. An' you've got the same iron in yuh. Think it over careful, Rance. Good drivers don't grow on cottonwoods; we need yuh. Ricker has lined up six good men. Gents, hard as hell, but dependable, to ride guard."

"Don't think I'd be interested, Hub," Morton replied. "I'm obliged to yuh."

HUB STOCKTON'S fat shoulders slumped. "Every dollar I got I'm gamblin' in this business," he argued. "Santa Fe is yellin' her head off for our trade. It's a chance for us all to clean up. If this first load gets through safe we're made! Otherwise—" he shrugged.

An idea occurred to Morton. If he *did* accept this job he'd be covering the dreaded trail, heeled for trouble. With gunmen flanking him he'd be prepared for a raid by McDowell. It might be the opportunity Morton wanted most of all—meeting McDowell, killing him.

But Morton didn't voice his thoughts. He started at the silky sound of Galt Ricker's voice.

"Better think it over, Morton," Ricker smiled. "It isn't because you're afraid, is it?"

Something seemed to snap in Morton's mind. All at once things went red in front of him. There was a thin sneer on Galt Ricker's lips. Maybe it was because of the ordeal Morton had been through. Maybe it was because he had always hated Galt Ricker.

Morton's right fist didn't travel far. But it whizzed out like the hoof of a kicking mule, smashing into Ricker's jaw, reeling him back over the desk top. Then Hub Stockton was yelling at Ricker who came to his feet, clawing for his gun, cursing.

"Hold it, Ricker!" he cried desperately. "Morton ain't to blame. He ain't himself!"

Smacking Galt Ricker was like a popoff valve to Morton's crowding emotions. Cool, now, he faced the two men, watched Ricker's right hand drop away from his gun. Ricker's black eyes writhed with unveiled hate. He carefully wiped the blood from his lips with a white handkerchief.

"We'll forget our personal difficulties—for the time, Morton," he said hoarsely.

"Anyway yuh want it, Ricker," Morton said quietly.

Galt Ricker got his hat and departed. Hub Stockton looked uneasily at the closed door. When he glanced up into Morton's eyes he couldn't hide his tinge of fear.

"Ricker ain't a man to forget, Rance. I'm afraid you've played hell."

"I've played it before, Hub," Morton said grimly. "Guess I did kinda fly off the handle. But if that job is still open I'll give yuh my answer about it in the mornin'."

He left while Hub Stockton stared

after him, pale eyes freighted with worry.

CHAPTER III

Attack!

LEAVING the freight office, Morton ate a late supper in a small restaurant. In a Mexican barber shop he got shaved. A hot bath relieved him of much weariness. He removed the bandanna about his head, leaving the partially healed wound exposed.

A desire to see Helen Stockton roweled him. The mercantile store hadn't closed yet. From the skinny proprietor, Morton purchased a new outfit, boots and ammunition with the meager funds he had in his wallet. Then he hurried to his horse. Through a window he saw Hub Stockton bent over his desk working.

Morton had little hope of finding Helen up at this hour of night. Yet there was a possibility she'd be up, awaiting the return of her uncle. Hub Stockton's 'dobe home was a rambling affair on the outskirts of town. As Morton drew near it he gladdened to the sight of the lamplit windows. He pulled up at the picket gate in front of the house, strode quickly toward the front porch.

Helen Stockton must have heard him ride up. The front door opened, a shaft of yellow light beaming out past her into the night. With a glad cry she rushed out to meet Morton, flung her arms about him and kissed him.

"Rance! I'm so glad you're here —safe!"

Morton thrilled to Helen Stockton's loveliness. That this beautiful, gold-haired girl had promised to be his wife some day was always a

Rance Morton yanked him off his feet

source of pleasant contemplation to him.

"Helen," he whispered bitterly. "I—"

"Galt told me, Rance."

"Ricker?" He stiffened.

"And you're hurt, Rance," Helen Stockton murmured feelingly. "That wound on your forehead."

"It's nothin', Helen. Ricker's been here?"

SHE clung to Morton, her eyes pleading.

"Yes, he was here a few minutes ago. He told me—everything, Rance." Tears suddenly leaped into her eyes. "I'm sorry, Rance—about Tag." She looked away. "Oh, I hate this country. It's violent, wild. Sometime I was hoping we could go to Saint Louis where it is civilized."

"I'd never live in Saint Louis, honey," Rance told her softly. "This *is* a wild, fierce country. But it's got to be tamed an' it's goin' to take men to do it. I'm goin' to stay. What else did Ricker tell yuh, Helen?"

Her eyes sought his. "Why, Rance, I believe you're jealous of Galt Ricker!"

"Mebbe I am," Morton admitted, slightly abashed.

They were silent for a moment. Then Helen said that Ricker had explained to her about offering Morton the freight driving job. She made no mention of the fight. Evidently Ricker hadn't told her.

"Please take that job, Rance. It'll mean success or failure to Uncle Hub—your driving. If Uncle Hub loses—"

Her voice broke and she clung to Morton. The sweet smell of her hair, her trembling closeness stirred in Morton new emotions.

"An' if I do," he asked eagerly, "you'll—"

"I'll be waiting," she whispered, "for *you*."

Despite his tragic thoughts, Morton laughed a little. They talked in whispers, there in the darkness of the front porch. Then he left her, striding quickly to his horse at the front gate. Mounting, he rode back toward the center of town. He didn't look back. He didn't see Galt Ricker hurry toward Helen out of the deep shadows at the corner of the house, following his departure. Nor did he see Ricker take Helen Stockton into his arms and kiss her.

"Very good, sweetheart," Ricker told her, smiling. "Looks like Rance will take the job and save the day for us."

And Helen Stockton laughed tremulously, as if it hurt.

But Morton didn't know all that. There was a light still burning in the freight office when he got to the center of town.

Morton knew that Hub Stockton would insist he spend the night at his home, if he stopped. And Morton didn't want that. He wanted to be alone where he could think.

At the Central Hotel he registered. After his horse was stabled and fed, he went up to his room and slept. Next morning he was up early, shaved. He found Stockton alone in the freight office. The oldster grumbled because Morton hadn't spent the night with him. Morton only grinned.

"I'll take that job, Hub."

Stockton let out a whoop. "I figgered yuh would, son. Helen was mighty pleased, too." He said that Ricker was out lining up the men who would ride guard. They'd pull out in the morning—the sooner the better. Ricker was anxious to grab control of that rich trade.

"I know yuh don't like Galt," Stockton finished. "But put up with him, Rance. I figger he's honest." He laughed. "See, he put up the brains an' I put up the *dinero*."

"An' you don't think you'd better

hold off on the first load for another month?" Morton suggested. "Wait until the military has a chance to stop McDowell's rampagin'."

Stockton shook his head emphatically. "Ricker says to wait a month an' somebody will beat us to it. It's now or never."

So Morton said nothing more. He left the office, strolled the familiar streets of Franklin. At some of the saloons he drank and gambled a little to spend the time. But not once throughout the entire day did he encounter Galt Ricker.

That night he visited Helen. Hub Stockton was there with them. They spoke little of the trip the next morning. Stockton tried to be jovial, but his pale eyes were haunted with worry. Once when Helen left the room, Stockton murmured affectionately:

"She's a good girl, Rance. Spoiled, but what the hell? It'll do my old heart good the day yuh make her yore missus."

It was late when Morton left. He went to his hotel room and slept soundly. At crack of day he was up. After a hurried breakfast he got his horse, went to the freight office. In front of the place was a huge covered wagon, brand new. To it were hitched two spans of mules. There were men lounging about on the walk nearby.

Their talk ceased as Morton came up. He went immediately into the office where Hub Stockton greeted him excitedly. Off to one side stood Galt Ricker, a thin smile of satisfaction on his lips. Beside him stood a brawny, red-faced man in a fur-lined coat.

The instructions Stockton gave were brief. In Santa Fe, Morton was to report at the stage line. A representative there would handle the freight and make arrangements for a return load the following week.

"Now I want yuh to meet yore *segundo,* Rance—Ferg Kendall."

Kendall was the big man beside Ricker. His tawny, close-set eyes met Morton's. In a deep bass voice he mumbled something as his heavy hand fell in Morton's. Beneath his great coat bulged a brace of holstered pistols.

Outside, Morton met the other men. There were six of them besides Ferg Kendall, hard-faced, gun-heeled men, sullen for the most part. Men who aroused in Morton no particular feeling of friendliness.

Climbing on the schooner seat, Morton took the ribbons in his hands, watched the seven men lead their broncs up from a corral back of the freight office. Rifle butts jutted from scabbards next to the saddles. The six harnessed mules stirred restlessly.

"Good luck, Rance!" Hub Stockton called. "An' *git through!*"

MORTON grinned, waved. Broncs wheeled as the guards mounted. Tug chains rattled, jerked, taut, as the mules strained forward. Wagon wheels creaked in the dusty street where the stir of another day was just beginning.

The sun rose higher. It became blistering hot. Dust rose through the swirling heat devils from the huge iron-rimmed wheels. The mules grew wet with sweat, grey from the dust.

At the rear of the wagon rode one guard. There were two on each side. In the lead rode big Ferg Kendall, his Hawkins rifle cradled in his arms.

Toward noon they stopped to eat, one of the guards doing the cooking. It struck Morton that these men were an uncommunicative lot. They looked grim, tight-lipped, and furtive-eyed—yet they seemed efficient enough. After all, they were

Save several cents a pack! Try Avalon Cigarettes! Cellophane wrap. Union made.

gunmen — and gunmen say little.

The long afternoon passed. Swaying to the motion of his spring seat, Morton's mind trailed back over all that had happened. Thoughts of dazzling Helen came to him. Then Killer McDowell. He found himself hoping that somewhere on the dread Jornada, McDowell and his men *would* attack! He was prepared for an attack now.

The second day they passed through the sleepy village of Mesilla—then Santa Ana. Here Morton called a halt. The pinto horse he had borrowed from the Mexican *cantina* owner had been tied to the end-gate of the wagon.

Morton returned the animal to the owner, slipped some money into the protesting Mexican's hand. Then Morton was back out on the wagon, lumbering up the dim trail.

THEY struck the Jornada del Muerte that evening. Within a mile of the site of Morton's disaster, camp was made. It was that night around the campfire that Morton first noticed a change in the gun-guards. All along they had obeyed Morton's brief orders with sullen indifference. There had never been any effort made toward friendliness with him. Instead, around the campfire they had grouped, talked in hoarse whispers with an occasional low laugh.

Now Morton caught the strong whiff of whiskey on their breaths. He wasn't averse to drinking. Yet on the trail it was generally accepted as taboo. But Morton said nothing. He leaned against a wagon wheel, tin plate of food in his lap. Across the small campfire from him, big Ferg Kendall was muttering something to his men.

Strange tides of uneasiness stirred Morton. Intuitively, he sensed trouble. He hadn't been blind to the growing restlessness of the men, their surliness, the past day. Yet, why would they cause trouble? Galt Ricker had picked these men—vouched for them, according to Stockton. Ricker had no reason for wanting trouble. If disaster struck this first freight load Ricker would be as much the loser as Hub Stockton.

Trouble, Morton had seen before. There had been plenty of it in his varied experiences along the Border. He'd heard his father tell of mutiny among the teamsters on the old Butterfield. And on more than one occasion, Morton had been dragged into rough and tumble saloon brawls. But his rock-hard fists had always quelled such trouble.

As was his custom, Morton rolled up in a blanket beneath the wagon that night. The other men slept off a few yards in the brush. Morton heard them mention the name "McDowell." Drunken, muffled talk followed. Then it was followed by raucous laughter.

Morton figured it to be past midnight when the men turned in. He'd heard enough of their talk to arouse ugly suspicions in his mind. Sleep seemed impossible. He felt of his six-shooter beside his blanket. Close by lay a rifle.

Tense, he listened to the mournful wail of a wolf far out in the brush. The campfire dimmed to red-hot embers that slowly cooled. Overhead in the starlit heavens the full moon shone down upon the brush and the silent camp. Nearby the hobbled mules and horses stirred, foraging the hay tossed them.

After a time drowsiness stole over Morton. Then sleep. He awoke with a start. Grey dawn was at hand, the promise of another hot day. The guards were already up, stirring a campfire.

In an instant, Morton had on his boots, the gun-belt strapped about his waist. Sloshing cold water over

his face and drying, he strode toward the fire. The men didn't look up at his approach. Silence held them. An ominous, blood-tingling silence that made Morton's blood run cold with apprehension.

"Better ketch up, men," Morton said quietly.

Their heads lifted as one. Slowly the men who had been hunkered down came to their feet, Ferg Kendall among them. Kendall's eyes were red. His beard-stubbled face was twisted into a wolfish gloating grin.

"There'll be no more ketchin' up, Morton," he grated.

"Meanin'?"

"You've given us yore last order. From here out it's jest us alone."

Now, Morton saw the death trap he had walked into. In another moment guns would be spewing at him. His mind raced, yet outwardly he was cold, unafraid. His slitted eyes looked into each man's leering, evil face.

"You gents were hired to safeguard this load against McDowell's killers," he stalled icily. "You'll continue on the job till we get to Santa Fe—or till the last load is out of my gun. Better think twice, Kendall."

It was all bluff with Morton. He knew he didn't stand a chance of living another ten seconds. He watched the seven men's hands sneak to gun-butts. Then Kendall was laughing harshly.

"McDowell's men!" he echoed in drunken triumph. "Hell, Morton, that's a good 'un! In case yuh don't know it, *we're McDowell's men!*"

As if his words were the signal of death, hands blurred through space, pistol-filled. But none moved faster, surer, than Rance Morton's. Gun-thunder ripped the silence of the early dawn. Red blossoms of flame leaped from gun-muzzles. Men yelled, cursed and fell.

Morton didn't feel the pluck of lead from that first deadly blast. Crouched, eyes burning slits, he triggered shot after shot into the swirling figures before him. Through the black gunsmoke he saw two men go down, but Kendall was still on his feet, his rageful bellows lost in the bedlam. He obviously hadn't meant to give Morton a chance to live. He hadn't figured on Morton's swift draw.

"Get him!" Kendall was roaring. "Kill him!"

With two slugs left in his gun, Morton tried desperately to drop the big killer. But he knew he had failed, even as a terrible shock numbed his brain and strength poured from his knees. As he struck the ground, Morton thought he was cursing Kendall, but no sound left his lips.

Unable to move, Morton peered through writhing black shadows, barely glimpsed big Ferg Kendall striding toward him through the gunsmoke. There was a pistol in Kendall's hand. Then, human endurance could stand no more and unconsciousness came to Morton like a smothering blanket.

CHAPTER IV

Up the Trail

OUT OF black oblivion, Morton opened his eyes into a pain-tortured world. Biting back a groan he stared up dazedly into a pair of coal-black eyes which peered down at him. Through a blur he saw a circle of swart-skinned faces. Indians with high cheek-bones and heavy features.

Whether the friendly Caddos or savage Apaches, Morton had no idea. The very fact that he was still alive puzzled him. The sun was high. From nearby came the stamp of

broncs, the muffled pad of moccasined feet in the sand as warriors moved about. Then from their guttural mutterings, Morton knew them to be Caddos.

The chief leaned nearer Morton. He said, *"Techa."*

"Techa," Morton repeated weakly.

For in his scant knowledge of the Caddo tongue Morton knew the word to mean "friend." Most of the Caddos he had known were peaceful, planters of pumpkins and maize, who made perennial quests into the hated Apache territory for the vanishing buffalo.

Things were hazy to Morton after that. He felt himself being hauled by travois to the Indians' distant lodge to the north. That night he lay on a robe in a tepee, watched the frenzied dancing of a medicine man over him. Fluttery weird light from a campfire outside silhouetted the forms of the half-naked warriors who watched in awe.

Tirelessly, the medicine man danced, rattling gourds, chanting his appeals to the only god he knew. From somewhere off in the night came the muted throb of tom-toms. The Indian brushed Morton's still form with the soft feathers of a horned owl, sprinkled him with malodorous powder.

Sometime later, fat squaws applied healing poultices to Morton's wounds. One bullet had gone through his thigh, one through his right shoulder.

Days passed. There were lucid periods when Morton saw and heard all that happened about him. The men were gone much of the time during the day, out on the hunt. The waddling fat women were left behind. And they visited Morton often, dressing his wounds, spooning him broth.

Then there were periods when hideous dreams plagued him. When he rolled and tossed, his beard-stubbled cheeks aflame with fever. Names and faces galloped through his mind. There was the leering evil face of Ferg Kendall suddenly appearing out of the blackness. Another face Morton imagined to be Killer McDowell. Then he thought Helen Stockton was bending over him, pleading with him to live.

But always when Morton opened his deep-sunk eyes, he found himself in the smelly tepee, the stir of activity about him. By listening and watching, he came to *sabe* much of the Caddo dialect, and it pleased the fat women mightily when his whispered replies were in their tongue.

"You will live, *techa,*" one of them told him. "Already your eyes are no longer dead. It is as the gods want it. We wonder why."

"I must live," Morton told them. "There are two men I must kill."

BUT many more days passed before Morton found he could hobble about the camp with the aid of a crutch. It was at the first hint of snow, when the mesquite had browned and the beans had dried. Along the river bottom the cottonwood leaves had yellowed, then fallen before the chill blasts that spoke of winter.

One night after eating, the chief paid another visit to Morton. "We depart soon for the land of the rising sun," he said stoically. "Our hunt is over. Though still weak you are able to ride. We welcome you to go with us if you wish."

Morton smiled. "I thank you for all you have done. But I must leave for Santa Fe."

"You seek vengeance for those who did you wrong?"

"Two men I seek to kill, *techa,*" Morton said softly. "One is named Kendall. The other Killer McDowell."

"I know not Kendall," murmured the chief. "But McDowell we know

too well. In a valley near Santa Fe he lives, an evil man with an evil tribe who has often stolen from us."

The next morning a fast little dun pony was presented to Morton by the chief. There was a packet of jerky, a bladder of water.

"They are yours," the chief intoned, face expressionless. "We also hate McDowell. Farewell."

So Morton rode out of camp, heading north. He looked back and waved. Hail and farewell! A mist came into Morton's eyes. His dusky friends, the Caddos, were standing in front of their tepees, watching as Morton rode on through the shadowy timber.

The first night he camped in the pine country. He awoke with a skift of snow covering his blanket. After a hurried breakfast he was traveling again. He still was weak, stiff. But the crisp, tangy air was like a tonic. His clothes were ragged, his boots thin. A heavy fur coat the Indians had given him warmed his chest and stomach. A tattered sombrero failed to hide his shoulder-length blond hair.

The heavy beard that covered his face fit in exactly with his plans. Gaunt and thin, garbed as he was, Morton felt certain that Ferg Kendall would never recognize him. Anyhow, Kendall had undoubtedly left Morton for dead that morning at dawn, along the Jornada.

Shadows of evening were daubing the snow-capped, pine-studded Sangre de Christos when Morton reached the outskirts of old Santa Fe. Along a 'dobe lined lane, he rode into the Plaza Publico. Shrill cries in Spanish, the seething raw life of this frontier town stirred Morton like warming wine.

Huge prairie schooners rumbled along the rutted main streets. Freighters, mule-skinners, buck-skinned, whiskered trappers stalked the plank walks, their strident bawls loosed to the darkening heavens. Black frock-coated gents with pale bland faces eased in and out the swinging doors of the better saloons. They were *caballeros* from the boundless ranches. And *pelados* scurrying the walks, black eyes alert to prey. Shrill-voiced vendors of tamales at each corner.

Here in Santa Fe the beaver and buffalo trade had waned, but other trade rocketed. From side streets, deep now in the gloom of night, came the raucous laughter of bearded, hell-bent men. The shrill voices of hawking women. The bellowing and whiskey talk of bull-whackers mingled with the tinkling of guitars and mandolins, which lifted above the throb of drums and the scuffle of boots on plank floors. Lawless, fierce, wild was this town, where money flowed like wine.

It was here that Morton knew he would eventually get trace of Ferg Kendall, whose trail would lead to Killer McDowell.

AT the crowded hitch-pole in front of the stage office, Morton dismounted. Inside a sallow-faced clerk stepped to the counter to meet him. Suddenly the clerk's scowl lifted. He stared as Morton advanced.

"Something I can do for yuh, Mister?" he mumbled.

Morton's heart skipped a beat. He knew this clerk. Knew him to be a small-time gambler, a one-time crony of Galt Ricker's back in Franklin.

Husking his voice, Morton casually asked when the next Stockton-Ricker freight wagon left for Franklin.

"In the mornin'," said the clerk uneasily. "There'll be two wagons an' the stage. They're runnin' together now. Only it ain't the Stockton-Ricker Freight Company now—jest Ricker."

A shock raced over Morton, but outwardly he showed no surprise at

this news. Bitterness gripped him with greater force. He could guess what had happened. With quiet thanks, he turned toward the door, sharply conscious of the clerk's eyes upon him.

Almost to the door, Morton's gaze lifted to a huge bulletin board. His blood froze! There, tacked to that board, was a poster, *his* picture on it. And without losing stride, Morton's eyes raked the printed words that said he was wanted for robbery and murder! There was a five-hundred-dollar reward for him, dead or alive. Offered by the Galt Ricker Freight Company of Franklin!

Puzzled, hate-roweled, Morton lost himself in the crowd along the walk. He wondered if the clerk had recognized him. He had acted strangely. But through the seething turmoil of Morton's thoughts sheered the savage urge to find Ferg Kendall. He'd have to hurry. If the clerk *had* recognized him—

FROM one saloon to another, Morton wended his way. At some of them he paused to drink. At one he gambled until his waning funds bade him stop. But always his cold grey eyes moved over the sea of faces he met. His fur jacket and unkempt appearance created no curiosity in the motley crowds.

Then the wailing song of a fandango drew him down a gloom-spawned side street. Light splashed through the windows of a long, low-roofed 'dobe building into the crisp dark night. It was a *baile*, thronged with charro-garbed dandies and short-skirted girls of mixed breed. To the rhythm of the Mexican guitars the dancers swayed, jostled around the smoke-filled room. Three deep around the floor stood the onlookers. Bearded men mostly, drinking from small jugs, eagerly awaiting their turn to dance.

Into this throng, Morton made his way. If Ferg Kendall was in Santa Fe, it would be such a dive as this that he would frequent. Questioning anyone would only be inviting trouble.

A jostling man's body struck Morton. A hoarse curse spun him about, right hand flashing to the pistol holstered beneath his coat. A bowie knife gleamed. Then Morton's draw froze as the reeling, one-eyed oldster sprang at him.

"Sully!" he cried hoarsely.

The wiry little drunk seemed to stop in midair. Oblivious of the hemming, staring spectators, he blinked his one eye. His bearded jaw sagged for an instant. Then he was laughing, shouting, hugging Morton.

"Rance Morton!" he whooped jubilantly. "By gumie an' leapin' hell, I thought yuh was long dead!"

He checked himself. Too late! Chilling to a stir behind him, Morton whirled, half-drawn gun leveling. Back of him, bowie drawn, Sully Northrup faced the tightening circle of bounty-hungry men who'd heard his ejaculation. Sully was cursing himself, barking threats above the sudden confusion.

"Make a move, yuh coyotes, an' there'll be hides all over this buildin' come mornin'!"

But it was to a new threat that Morton turned. In front of him heads were turning toward the door. The music had stopped. Above the confusion a girl's voice rose in shrill warning.

"Los soldados! Los soldados!" she yelled.

Mind spinning, Morton glimpsed the blue-coated soldiers as they swarmed belligerently through the door, a red-faced Irish corporal in the lead. The crowd stalled his charge momentarily.

"Who answers to the name of Rance Morton?" he shouted furiously. "Yer not deef! Speak up an'

come in peace or every mother's son of ye will git a clubbin'!"

"The woods is full of clubs, sojer!" Sully blatted. "An' knives. Who says Rance Morton is here?"

"I'm Rance Morton! What's the charge, Corporal?"

The soldiers were trying to fight their way through to Morton's side. But the drunken bullwhackers who held them back had different ideas. If there was a bounty of five hundred on Morton's head they wanted it.

"Stealin' a Ricker freight wagon!" raged the corporal. "An' murder of the crew except one—"

"Which one?" Morton rapped.

"Man by the name of Kendall!"

"Liar!" bawled Sully.

But Morton was already easing back toward a large window, taking the threat-whooping oldster with him. The deadly lights in Morton's deep-set eyes held the snarling pack at bay. His cocked pistol swayed over the crowding group. The soldiers began swearing, adding to the uproar. One of their gun-butts fell, dropping a trapper. Then hell broke loose!

In one mighty bound, Morton whirled, smashing out the window with his booted foot. Triggering a shot over the heads of the oncoming mob he leaped out into the night as another gun crashed in the bedlam. At his heels came Sully.

Lead whined over their heads as they struck the ground. Sully was swearing, yelling, pointing. Down a narrow black lane they sped, turning a corner as the muted shouts rocketed into the night behind them.

Once the shouts had dimmed, Morton paused in a darkened doorway. He felt Sully clutching his arm. The oldster's red-shot eye shone with excitement.

"By gumie, Rance," he panted. "Me talkin' outa turn damn near got our bellies full of lead that time. But a ghost showin' up couldn't have jarred me more."

"No time to talk now, Sully."

"Not with hell snappin' at our heels. I got the place. Come on," he said.

Through a honeycomb of smelly, dark alleys, Morton followed at the little man's heels. Finally they drew up on the outskirts of Mex Town. Sully ducked into a tiny one-room 'dobe hut, closed the plank door behind them. He struck a match, lit a candle in the neck of a bottle.

"Safe enough now, Rance," he crowed. "Them soldiers couldn't find us with hound dawgs."

It was a crudely furnished hut. In one corner was an ill-kept bunk. There was but one window and it was covered with a blanket.

At Sully's request, Morton briefly told all that had happened to him since the attack on their wagon that morning when Tag was killed. His voice was bitter, low.

"Tonight I was huntin' Kendall. Figgered if I could find him I could cut McDowell's sign."

"By gumie," whispered Sully, shaking his head. "By gumie."

THEN he told how the morning of the attack he'd dashed off into the brush. One of McDowell's men had ridden him down, knocked him out. When he'd come to the camp was in shambles. The cows were gone.

"You were gone—an' Tag. I *sabe* how it happened now, but I was half loco then. Bein' no bodies anyplace I reckoned they'd taken yuh two prisoners mebbe. Or killed yuh an' took the bodies off some place an' buried yuh. Anyhow I found a stray hoss."

Hoping for vengeance against McDowell, Sully had finally made his way to Santa Fe. He'd been here ever since.

"Killin' McDowell is all that matters now, Sully," Morton murmured

tightly. "So far as clearin' up my name—"

He stopped. There was a strange smile on Sully's lips.

"It's funny, Rance," he said queerly. "Funny as hell the way things happen. I know where McDowell is."

"You do?"

Sully's one eye lowered. He nodded. "Shore I do, Rance. "What'll yuh do if I take yuh to him?"

Morton was on his feet now, face pale beneath the beard. Hate drenched his eyes.

"I'll kill him, Sully," he said softly.

But Sully Northrup shook his head knowingly. "No, yuh won't, Rance," he answered slowly. "Yuh'll do the same thing I did."

And with that he stepped quickly to the door.

CHAPTER V

Killer McDowell

STRANGE the way Sully was acting. He gave no chance for questions. Perplexed, Morton followed him outside, watched the little man close the hut door behind them.

"Foller me," Sully Northrup said shortly.

Again through a tangle of dark lanes he led the way at a trot. Snow was beginning to fall, the stinging cold wind whining around the corners of the buildings. Here and there some of the 'dobe buildings shone with candle-light. But for the most part they were dark.

Morton noticed that Sully was avoiding the center of town. He trailed at the little hellion's heels, wondering. Once they passed a staggering Mexican who bawled a drunken challenge at them. But they ducked past him without trouble.

Suddenly, Sully stopped in the doorway of a small hut. Quickly he glanced about in the darkness, then knocked. Feeble light slipped through the cracks in the door. From inside, Morton caught the startled voice of a person whispering something. A girl's voice! And Morton found himself trembling, hand dropping to the gun beneath his coat. He'd prayed for this moment. Over Tag's grave he'd made a vow to kill the renegade McDowell. Now—

Sully's low whisper struck above the wailing wind. "It's me, Marsha. It's Sully."

The bolt of the door moved. The door opened. Feeble candle-light fell upon the two men. Then Sully stepped quickly inside, Morton at his heels, and the door closed.

Morton never knew how the gun came into his right hand. Stunned, he looked at the girl facing him—the one who had opened the door for them. One of her hands flew to her lips, muffling her cry of "Sully!"

"Hold it, Rance," Sully said quickly. "This is Marsha McDowell." He turned, nodded to a thin, pale-faced man who had risen to his elbows on a cot. "An' this is—"

"Colonel Clinton McDowell," murmured the man bitterly. He bit back a cough, a twisted smile coming to his bloodless lips. "Sully has told us about you, Morton. Pull up a chair."

He didn't seem to see the gun in Morton's hand. And Morton made no move, no sound. Disappointment jarred through him like a shock. If this was Killer McDowell there was no fight left in him. Morton had always visioned a huge brute of a man as Killer McDowell. A man with a savage snarl on his lips. A gunman whom Morton could taunt, then kill as he would a snake.

Slowly Morton's gun lowered.

Shaken with mingled emotions, he looked from face to face. Then his gaze returned to the sick man.

"Yuh're Killer McDowell?" he asked hoarsely.

"Only in name," the man admitted weakly.

Sully smiled sadly. "Yuh're doin' what I done, Rance. I came here to kill McDowell, but I didn't. Looks like we got our rope snarled plumb helpless. Let McDowell tell yuh."

MORTON found himself drawn to the bedside. He hardly noticed the girl. But the three of them in that room, grouped around the sick man, listened to a tale of tragedy and despair. There was little doubt that Clinton McDowell was telling the truth. His pasty white face grew flushed. At times he choked back a wracking cough that came from deep in his tortured lungs. He seemed to know his days were numbered.

"I was a colonel in the army, Morton. Word reached me that my—my wife was ill, dying. I knew that granted leave was impossible at the time, so I—I ran away—deserted. I got home too late. But I couldn't go back to the army then. I was a deserter and to return meant but one thing—death. Marsha was only a small girl then. We escaped, came into this country."

He had taken up a homestead in a secluded valley south of Santa Fe, began ranching in a small way. Coming into Santa Fe one day for supplies he had bumped into a Captain Dean, who knew that Colonel McDowell was still wanted by the law.

McDowell's eyes smoldered with hate. Above the blanket his bony hands clenched.

"Dean was with me in the army, Morton," he said huskily. "He trailed me to the valley, fetched his men. They were cutthroats, killers. They built a camp in the valley, began rustling at first. That led on to worse things. They used my name and I couldn't leave. I couldn't even fight. It was hell, Morton. God alone knows what I suffered. I was afraid for Marsha. We were prisoners until one night a week ago we escaped—"

A paroxysm of coughing shook him. His eyes closed. And for a long moment there was silence except for the moan of the wintry wind outside.

"*Sabe*, Rance?" Sully whispered.

Morton could only nod. His eyes were frozen on the pallid face of Killer McDowell—the man he had come to kill. He barely heard Sully tell him how he first discovered McDowell. Three nights ago, Marsha had sneaked out for food. Some ruffians had stopped her.

"I come up jest then," Sully explained, "an' got here away. The rest you know. This Ferg Kendall skunk yuh mentioned is Dean's right hand bower. They're the ones we want."

"We've got to find them, Sully," Morton muttered grimly.

"Kendall and—and his men are in town searching for us now. That's why we are hiding out here. I don't know what we would have done without Mr. Sully."

Morton started to the sound of the girl's voice. A rich voice, soft with Southern warmth. Morton rose, and she came to her feet. Their eyes locked. A surge of strange emotions warmed Morton's veins. He had hardly noticed her until now. He'd never seen a girl quite so pretty. Dark hair framed her suntanned cheeks. Her eyes were deep pools, troubled with worry. But there was something deeper than her beauty that struck Morton. There was something brave and wholesome about her. Being dressed in buckskin skirt, boots and woolen blouse only added to her charm.

"Marsha," Morton murmured.

He hardly knew why he called her name. Her full red lips parted, and still their eyes clung. Then as if some powerful magnet were at work they moved toward one another.

"Rance—Rance Morton," she whispered.

THEY forgot Sully's presence until he said, "We've got to help them get away, Rance. Kendall an' his skunks are scourin' the town for McDowell to kill him."

"You'll help us, Rance Morton," the girl asked tremulously. "We've got a little money. If we could only get out of town—go some place away from those beasts!"

"You hated the valley then?"

"Not the valley," the girl told Morton. "It is beautiful. It was wonderful living there until Kendall and Dean came. We saw little of Dean, but Kendall—" She shuddered.

Morton remembered the clerk in the freight office telling him of the stage leaving in the morning, along with freight wagons. He told Sully and the girl about it. They could take the stage to Mesilla. There they could catch a stage to California.

New hope came into the girl's eyes, but it was quickly followed by despair. "How will we get on the stage without being seen?"

"We'll tend to that."

"But you—Rance?" she cried. "You and Mister Sully?"

Morton brushed aside her fears. There was nothing for them to fear, he told her. He suddenly found himself thinking only of getting Marsha McDowell and her father to safety. Later he could trail down Kendall and this Captain Dean.

The girl ran to the bedside. Colonel McDowell's eyes were open. He must have heard what had been said.

"Father, you heard? We're leaving—"

"I heard, honey."

Morton felt Sully's gaze upon him. Sully knew the chance they were running in getting the girl and her father on the stage. Yet it seemed the only way.

When the girl hurried into the adjoining room to pack their scant belongings, Colonel McDowell's tear-misted eyes sought Morton's.

"I want to thank you, Morton," he said gratefully. "Maybe there is a chance."

McDowell sounded like a man praying, saying that. When his eyes closed, Sully glanced at Morton, grinned.

"An' the devil take the hindmost," he grunted.

"Shut up, Sully," Morton said softly.

No further word passed between them. From the other room came sounds of Marsha McDowell moving about. Already it was past midnight, Morton knew. Outside the storm was raging, snow sifting in beneath the plank door.

In one corner of the room was a tiny fireplace, sticks of wood stacked nearby. Morton built a fire to busy himself. It took the chill from the room.

Soon Marsha joined them, a battered valise in one hand.

The hours dragged past. The three of them talked in low whispers, planning, voicing their hopes, while McDowell slept. He looked like a corpse in the fluttery candle-light. Like a dirge the snow-swept wind moaned outside.

Morton said little. He found his eyes straying to Marsha McDowell. And always when he looked at her their eyes met. Morton found himself comparing her with Helen Stockton. Somehow the memory of Helen seemed vague, remote, something out of the past.

"I talked with a freighter the other day," Sully said. "He said Hub

Stockton was broke. Ricker borrowed money an' took over the business."

"I guessed that, Sully," Morton answered.

Sully didn't mention Helen. And Morton was glad. Toward dawn they had a bite of breakfast. The stage usually pulled out shortly after daybreak. It was plain that every move Colonel McDowell made was an effort, taxing the last ounce of his strength.

He bundled himself in a heavy coat, pulled a hat low over his feverish eyes. Marsha donned a man's mackinaw.

"All set?" Morton asked quietly.

"Ready," McDowell nodded.

Day was already at hand. Six inches of snow carpeted the ground and the flat roofs of the 'dobe buildings. They moved through the unbroken snow of the narrow lane, Sully in the lead with Marsha. Behind them, Morton walked with McDowell, holding the sick man's arm to assist him.

SANTA FE town was still asleep. But when they came out into the Plaza Publico they saw two huge covered wagons and a stage standing in front of the freight office. Two or three bundled men were moving about, swinging their mittened hands to keep warm, talking. Already there appeared to be a passenger or two in the stage.

Then Morton stiffened. One of those men he recognized as the sallow-faced clerk he had talked with last night. He stopped, calling a soft warning to Sully. They were only a short distance away. The four of them stepped back into a doorway.

"Guess you can make it now," Morton told McDowell and the girl. "It's *adios,* I guess."

There were unshed tears in Colonel McDowell's eyes when he bade Morton good-by. His finely-chiseled features were white as the snow. When Marsha came up to Morton her lips were trembling.

"Good-by—Rance," she whispered, a choke in her voice. "I'll remember you, always. God bless you."

Then she turned to her father. Morton and Sully watched them trudge through the snow, climb into the stage. Morton would always remember the way the frosty breath had passed her lips when she'd said good-by.

He felt a cold hand creep over his heart.

Tides of warning swept across his mind.

Whips cracked. Loud whoops from the drivers cut through the early morning silence. Mules plowed through the snow, the huge wagons behind them. The Jornada del Muerte lay ahead—maybe death. *Quien sabe?*

A hand waved as the stage creaked past. It was Marsha. Morton lifted a hand of farewell. With Sully at his side he watched the caravan round a corner farther down the street. And to Morton it seemed as if something had gone out of his life.

He wasn't aware of the group of men who suddenly rushed out of the freight office behind them. One of the men was the sallow-faced clerk, eyes wide with excitement. He was pointing, showing three uniformed soldiers the two lone men who had their backs turned.

The soldiers ran noiselessly through the snow, pistols in their hands.

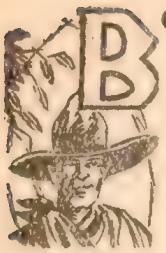
Behind them trailed the frightened clerk.

"That's him!" the clerk suddenly shrilled. "Git him!"

Morton whirled, right hand flashing gunward. Too late! The soldiers were on him, their pistols leveled.

CHAPTER VI

Capture—and Escape



BOWIE knife in hand, Sully stood waiting. Ignoring the harsh warning of the charging soldiers, he roared:

"By gumie, Rance!"

"No use, Sully!"

Morton wasn't a coward, but one wrong move now meant death, and he knew it. Cursing, he lifted his hands, Sully following suit.

"Perty smart, Rance Morton," one of the soldiers barked. "Yuh freight-robbin' polecat! Easy now or we'll gutshoot yuh an' One-Eye here. Take 'em, boys."

Morton submitted to arrest, to the quick binding of his wrists behind his back. He fought back his blinding surge of rage. Ahead lay what the frontier towns call quick justice. A hurried court trial, the inevitable verdict of guilty. Guilty of freight robbing and murder! That could mean but one thing: death!

The soldiers made a hurried trip to the jail with their two prisoners. Sully, unarmed now the same as Morton, swore like a mule-skinner every step of the way.

"Damn it, Rance!" he fumed. "Some son of hell's goin' to pay with a skulpin' for this!"

"Steady, old-timer."

It was a damp, gloomy jail, just off the main square. The local constable took charge of the prisoners once they were in the cell. He was a bony-faced man with sneaking eyes. When the soldiers departed he peered through the iron-barred door.

"Killers, huh?" he sneered. "Two ringy ones, eh? Well, yuh two won't be ringy long. The scaffold buildin' will start this evenin'." The man chuckled maliciously.

"Hell's full of scaffolds, Sneaky!" Sully bawled hotly. "But I'll lay yuh my bowie agin yore dirty hat we don't hang."

Sneaky, the constable, made a snarling sound meant for a laugh. Morton knew the man had been drinking. He'd likely talk. And there were some questions spinning through Morton's mind he wanted answered.

"Who put up the five hundred reward for me, Constable?" he gritted.

"Mister Galt Ricker of Franklin, that's who!" snapped the lawman. "He'll likely ride up here to testify agin yuh. But if he don't Ferg Kendall will be here. Yuh had a lot of guts, Morton, tryin' to kill all them gun-guards so's yuh could steal the wagon plunder."

Morton hardly heard the rest. Cold fury pounded at his temples. Things were even more puzzling. The moment the constable departed, Morton turned to Sully.

"I can't *sabe* it yet, Sully," he gritted, fiercely. "On the trail that morning Kendall an' his men left me for dead. I figger I plugged a couple of them. But I didn't kill them all except Kendall, like the corporal blurted last night. It don't tally—that reward poster and the law wantin' *me*."

"Two an' two makes four, Rance," Sully muttered wisely. "I been doin' a helluva lot of thinkin' since I met you. It can only mean one thing—"

A hunch hit Morton like a blow. "More than one thing, Sully!" he ground out. "It means that Kendall an' his men grabbed the wagon and goods, disposed of it some place. To keep the law off his own tail, Kendall came into Santa Fe alone an' made out as if I had killed all the men but him. And he's told them that *I* stole the load!"

"An' this *jefe* of renegade valley, Captain Dean, is settin' back in the valley laughin' at what a smart right-hand bower he's got in Kendall," Sully grated savagely. "Yuh're

thinkin' fast, Rance, keep it up. Not that thinkin' is goin' to get us outa this hole."

"Only one more thing, Sully. Why did Galt Ricker happen to hire Kendall an' his cutthroats? Or did it jest happen?"

Miserably, Sully shook his head. "You figger it out, Rance. I need a drink."

Morton couldn't just then. He began pacing the cell like a caged puma. Each passing hour seemed like an agonizing eternity. Through the maelstrom of his seething, hate-filled thoughts flashed the memory of Marsha McDowell. Then there was Tag, Hub Stockton and Helen.

At noon the sneaking-eyed constable fetched them food, mocked them, then left. The sun set early that evening, deepening the gloom of the cell. It grew colder and the wind came up as night fell.

WITH two plates of beans, the constable came back to the cell. His eyes were bloodshot from drink. A drunken grin furled his lips.

"Trial's tomorrer," he gloated. "They cain't find Kendall to testify, an' they ain't goin' to wait for Galt Ricker to come up. We fix gents in this here town."

Morton was gripping the iron bars of the door, Sully beside him. Every muscle in Morton was trembling for action. Hope galloped rampant through his mind. He'd been waiting for this moment. He smiled icily.

"An' how yuh bettin', Constable, hangin' or freedom?"

The lawman shoved the plates of beans under the door. His head jerked up in surprise. Morton's two arms shot through the bars with the speed of a striking snake. A terrified scream broke from the lawman as Morton's hands found the scruff of his neck. He tried to jerk loose, to draw his gun. With a terrific heave, Morton jerked Sneaky-Eyes off his feet, smashed his head against the bars.

The man's head made a sickening thudding sound as it struck the steel bars. His eyes closed. He went limp, spilling to the floor as Morton released him. Sully was cursing and laughing in glee at the same time.

"Dang my soul, Rance!" he whooped. "Never seen nothin' slicker. Let me outa here so I can tromp him!"

"Forget that, Sully! We're leavin'!"

Morton was reaching through the bars, desperately tearing the huge key ring from about the unconscious lawman's belt. His flying fingers found the right key. Then the door was unlocked.

In one bound, Morton was outside in the corridor. Stooping over the lawman, he unbuckled the man's holstered gun and ammunition pouch. Sully raced to the front office. When Morton joined him Sully had found his beloved "skulpin' knife." From a wall peg he snatched down a holstered pistol, strapping it about his buckskin waist.

Heart pounding like a trip-hammer, Morton leaped to the door. Santa Fe had come to life. From the street outside came the muted murmur of voices, the grind of wagon wheels moving through the slushy streets. No need giving Sully instructions. Ahead lay the promise of freedom or death.

"Ready, Sully?"

The little hellion grinned, cold as death. "Ready, son! Lead on, an' anybody that gits in our way give 'em hell!"

"Grab the first saddled horse yuh see!"

Flinging caution to the four winds, Morton ripped the door wide. A man stood framed in the doorway! The belligerent corporal who had tried to capture Morton at the dance-hall last night. He had been just

preparing to enter the office. Thunderstruck, he stared. Morton's steely right fist lashed out with his full weight behind it. It caught the army officer between the eyes. His body seemed to fly through space. He fell in a snow bank edging the street, and didn't move.

Outside, Morton sprinted toward a loaded hitch-rack, Sully at his heels. Farther down the dark street came a strident bawl of alarm, lifting above the other noises. Men were suddenly running toward the jail from both directions, yelling, their figures plain as they leaped through the splashes of yellow lights from the store fronts.

"The jail!" rose the cry. "Prisoners escapin' the jail!"

"They high-tailed down this way!" Sully roared. "We're after 'em!"

His cry only added to the confusion. Men were afraid to shoot in the darkness. They milled, whooping, cursing, asking questions. Then Morton and Sully were ahorse, spurring off like demons before the first shot was fired.

Bent low over their plunging horses' necks, they roared down the gloomy street toward the Plaza Publico. Lead sang about them, plumping into the snow slush at their flying heels. High above the dimming bedlam at their backs rose the rage-choked howl of the Irish corporal who had evidently come to life.

When the plaza was behind them and they were thundering toward the edge of town through a narrow lane, Morton caught his breath. He hipped about in the kak, saw Sully trailing his heels, waving his bowie. Undaunted by the pursuit that was bound to come, Sully let out a war-whoop that hearkened of the old days.

"By gumie, Rance! That soldier musta thought yuh hit him with a wagon tongue!"

Morton didn't try to answer. But he grinned, thrilling to the courage and loyalty of this knife-wielding oldster. On a high wind-swept hill, Morton called the first halt. In the shadows of some timber, the two men sat their winded horses, listening for sounds of pursuit. An icy wind played through the tree-tops. Morton knew they'd have to hurry. Unless more snow came it would be an easy matter to cut their trail.

He recalled the instructions Colonel McDowell and Marsha had given him to reach Hideout Valley. Just before leaving McDowell's 'dobe hut they had told him it lay straight south of Santa Fe a few hours ride. They couldn't miss it if they kept in a bee-line due south.

"Think yuh can find the valley in this storm, Rance?" Sully asked anxiously. He seemed to be reading Morton's thoughts.

"Due south, Sully. We'll have to chance it."

"An' me with one eye," mourned Sully.

MORTON rode on, the little man behind him. The wind grew bitter cold, howling through the timbered lanes, sweeping around high buttes where the brush was thin. Morton's teeth chattered despite his fur coat. His feet and hands grew numb from the cold. He knew Sully was suffering, with only his rawhide jacket to protect his chest. He stopped, peeled off his coat.

"Take it, Sully," he ordered.

Sully could hardly make the words come he was so cold.

"Hell's full of hot days, son. Keep yore coat. I'm all right."

Morton didn't argue. He knew Sully was freezing. He made the little oldster crawl into the coat, and grumbling, Sully accepted the warmth it offered. With only a denim jacket now, Morton felt the wind cut through him like a knife.

But he gritted his teeth and went on.

A pale wintry moon came out after a while. It cast a ghostly haze over the pine-studded hills, the snow-clogged arroyos. Morton led the way through drifts, up hills and down, but always bearing to the south.

He grew drowsy. His eyelids felt weighted with lead. Every slight move he made with his arms and legs was torture. The dull thud of the horses' hoofs on the frozen ground seemed far away. Once he glanced back.

Sully was riding hunched over, his coonskin-covered head slumped low over his chest.

Somewhere ahead lay Hideout Valley. Intuition told Morton that he'd find Ferg Kendall there. And Captain Dean—whoever he was. There would be the other renegades who had killed Tag and wrecked Morton's life. Living long enough to get into the valley and kill some of those men was all that mattered to Morton now. He knew there was not one chance in a hundred of him and Sully ever riding out again. But in settling with Kendall and this Dean gent, Morton felt that his vow over Tag's grave would be fulfilled.

"Rance?"

Sully's soft cry came to Morton like a voice in a dream. He jerked erect as the little man pulled up beside him. They were on a high ridge.

Down below them lay a valley, a perfect oval.

"That's it, Rance!" Sully croaked excitedly. "Them's cabins down there!"

Morton saw them now. Down below in a snow-blanketed clearing stood a cluster of log cabins. They were plain in the moonlight. Smoke rose lazily into the night air from some of the chimneys. Square patches of light from some of the windows peered out into the gloom like sinister eyes.

In front of one log building, larger than the others, stood a dozen or so saddled horses.

New hate raced through Morton, deadening the chill. Beneath the brim of his hat his eyes glinted. His fighting jaw set. There would be no blundering now.

"Chances for livin' are slim if yuh foller me, Sully," he gritted. "A posse is likely tailin' us. Yuh still got a chance to circle the valley an' head on south to Franklin."

Sully's lips were pulled back over his stained teeth. Frost whitened his whiskers, made him look weird in the dim light.

"Tag was like my own kid, Rance," he said shortly. "Ride on."

WITHOUT another word, Morton eased his bronc down the steep slope, Sully following. Halfway down, Morton jerked reins, alert now, every sense attuned to danger. The whisper of death seemed to ride the cold wind. And on that wind rode the hint of hoofbeats, the yells of men.

"Listen," Sully whispered.

Morton traced the sound. Across the valley from them a string of heavily loaded mules was being hazed toward the center of the tiny log-cabin village! At least eight mules, there were, packs on their backs, trudging across the snow. The vague figures of four horsebackers were whipping them along.

"That's loot, Sully!" Morton said softly. "They've plundered another wagon train!"

Not until the mules were driven into a pole corral back of the big cabin did Morton make a move. Then he headed straight down the slope. On the valley floor he and Sully found themselves in a patch of pines. Not a hundred yards ahead

of them lay one of the outlying cabins, windows glowing with lamplight.

Back of the cabin, Morton spotted huge corrals and sheds. The low moan of cattle came to him. He slipped to the ground, his knees almost buckling beneath him. Drawing his gun, he motioned to Sully. Slowly, cautiously, they circled the cabin, came up back of the sheds.

In the black shadows of the corral, Morton suddenly stopped, an inaudible curse escaping him. He was looking over the pole enclosure, staring at the restless cattle inside. In the silvery moonlight their brands were visible. Circle M brands!

"Sully! That's what's left of my herd!"

Seeing his cattle here did something to Morton. Fresher than ever, it brought memories of Tag. Tag had worked those cows. Morton had given him ownership of half of them.

With Sully's soft warning cry in his ears, Morton sprinted across the moonlit space toward the shadows of the cabin. He was in the gloom, flat against the logs when a rear door burst open. Morton's heart seemed to stop. Within arm's reach of him a man with a leveled rifle bolted outside in the shaft of light. The man saw Sully, but not Morton.

Startled, the man's rifle jerked to his shoulder. Morton leaped like a cougar, his gun-butt arcing down. It caught the renegade in the back of the head, downing him like a pole-axed steer.

Sully was in the lamplight now, trying desperately to say something, pointing behind Morton. There was somebody in the doorway! Even as Morton whirled to the new threat a girl screamed!

"Rance!" she sobbed hysterically. "Rance!"

He saw her then. It was Marsha McDowell!

CHAPTER VII

Two Men Must Die

MORTON stood staring like a man transfixed, gun gripped in his fist.

"Marsha!" he managed.

She rushed toward him, and he took her into his arms as if she were a small child seeking protection. What she was saying made little sense at first.

"Dad's dead, Rance!" she sobbed. "Murdered! Now—"

Her voice broke and Morton, suddenly realizing their danger out here, rushed her through the cabin door. Sully dragged the body of the renegade in after them, closed the door.

"Out like a lamp, Rance!" he cackled.

"Better tie him up, Sully." Mind spinning, Morton turned to Marsha McDowell. "Now tell me, why are you here?" His voice was stern.

She had a grip on her emotions now. "It—it all seems like a horrible nightmare, Rance. I thought we were safe when the stage left Santa Fe—"

The horror of all that she had seen was still in Marsha McDowell's dark eyes. This afternoon, only a short ways from Santa Fe, Kendall and Captain Dean's men had swooped down out of the hills.

"It came so sudden, Rance. The first I knew they were on us, shooting, killing. It was terrible. Men dying, the wagons burning. Most of the freighters were killed, I guess. Kendall came to the stage. I'll never forget the awful way he laughed when he saw—saw Dad. And Dad tried to fight, Rance. Somebody must have struck me. The next I knew Kendall had me in his arms. He and some of the other men were hurrying back here to the valley."

Morton guessed the rest before Marsha told him. They had fetched her here, a prisoner. Those loaded mules that had just entered the valley were carrying the loot from the freight wagons. This man Morton had just knocked out was a guard Kendall had placed here to watch Marsha.

"An' Kendall," Morton muttered quickly. "Where is he now? An' this Captain Dean?"

"Down the way at the big cabin, Rance. The men all live there. This cabin was Dad's and mine. The Indians helped us build it. Then Tonca—"

"Tonca?"

Marsha explained that Tonca was an old Indian woman who had lived with them. She had cared for Marsha and Colonel McDowell as if they were of her own blood.

"She went with us as far as Santa Fe when we escaped," Marsha hurried on. "We left her there."

Morton saw that Sully had the renegade bound. He strode swiftly into the front room. It was a huge room, logs flaming in a rock fireplace at one end. Indian carpets covered the floor. Morton was at the front door when Marsha reached him.

"Where you going, Rance?"

"To kill Kendall an' Dean!" He ignored her hands on his shoulders. "Sully, take Marsha out the back. Run for our horses. You two ride like hell for Santa Fe!"

"Ride, hell, son!" Sully rapped. "Yuh're not leavin' me outa this skunk killin' spree!"

"Rance!" Marsha cried, pleadingly. "They'll kill you, Rance! Neither of you men will have a chance against that bunch of killers! There's at least fifteen of them. I'm not thinking of myself, Rance. It's you!"

"It's our only chance, Marsha!"

"We can all three escape, Rance," she begged. "We'll go some place—any place! Forget what's happened."

She stopped, her stark eyes flooded with tragic hopelessness, for Morton already had the door open. His pistol came into his right hand. His blue-grey eyes looked like ice.

"Yuh're takin' Marsha an' gittin' out, Sully!" he rapped savagely. "Yuh've got to! Damn it, this is no time to think of ourselves! Promise me—"

"I promise," Sully said queerly. Then Morton was gone, the door closing behind him. "But here's one time my promise ain't worth a damn," Sully finished in a whisper.

Marsha leaned weakly against the log wall, her eyes closed, face pale as death.

"Help him, God," she choked. "Help him."

And Sully Northrup, who was breaking a promise, stood like a stricken man in the center of the room, his one eye blinking.

While outside, Morton's slitted eyes raked the shadows as he sprinted toward the center of the outlaw village. There were eight or ten cabins, flanking the semblance of a street. In the midst of them stood the large log building, its glass-paned windows yellow with light. The saddled horses stood in front.

OTHER cabins were dark. The moon had gone down. That was in Morton's favor. The wind had died. Drifted snow was piled up against the black logs of the building.

Gun in hand, Morton made straight for the corrals at the rear of the lighted building. No plan yet offered itself to him. He'd have to wait. He had six loads in his gun. If luck rode double with him he might get Kendall and Dean before the other renegades downed him. With those two dead, the backbone of the outlaw clan would be broken. Morton's debt would be paid.

In the black shadows of the log hut adjoining the big building, Morton stopped. Flat against the wall, he caught his breath, hearkening to the sound of men's hoarse voices coming from the main cabin. Boot heels thumped against the plank floor as those men moved about. Loud, drunken talk filtered out into the cold night. From the darkness at the rear came sounds of the animals moving about in the corral.

With sudden decision, Morton dashed toward the rear of the building. Heart pounding, he rounded the corner, stopped to get his bearings. He had hoped to find a rear door. But there was none. Just beyond him a square window shone with light. Slowly, he moved through the drifted snow toward it. An uncanny premonition of danger roweled him. He felt another presence somewhere in the darkness near him. Yet he'd seen no one since leaving Marsha and Sully.

Almost to the window, Morton froze! Low voices reached him. One was the raspy, familiar voice of big Ferg Kendall! The other—

At the window Morton stopped. Through the frosted pane he saw two men sitting at a crude table in a small back room. A lamp was on the table, a black bottle and two glasses. Stunned, Morton stared—not at Ferg Kendall, but at the man opposite him. And in that split second every suspicion that Morton might have had came true. Through the seething turmoil of his thoughts struck the realization that at last the naked truth had been revealed to him.

The man in the room with Kendall was Galt Ricker!

Ferg Kendall was obviously drunk. His tawny eyes were beady, bloodshot. In his huge hairy hand he lifted a filled glass to his lips, drained it. About his thick waist were his two black-butted pistols.

"Yuh're jest boogery, Dean," he rumbled.

Ricker smiled icily. "Captain Dean to you, Kendall."

KENDALL'S head seemed to sink into his shoulders. He scowled, one hand fingering the butt of his gun. A deadly tension came between the two men. Their eyes duelled. But Galt Ricker was the stronger of the two. He looked like a coiled rattler, sitting there. Hate, contempt for this brawny, uncouth man across from him shone in his eyes. His thin lips curled in a cold smile. The scar on his right cheek looked like a strip of torn paper.

"Well, say what yuh got to say, Dean!" Kendall blurted harshly. "Me'n the men—"

"You and the men are fools, Kendall!" Ricker suddenly snarled. "I'm still *jefe* of this camp and you're the *segundo;* remember that, Kendall. Make a funny move now and I'll kill you before your gun leaves leather. I know you've been arousing the men against me."

"That's a lie, Dean!"

Ricker's handsome face darkened with fury. "We'll settle that later, Kendall. I didn't order you to plunder that wagon train and coach today. Nobody but a thick-headed fool would have done that. Already the law is hounding us out of Santa Fe. They won't quit now till they track us down."

"Mebbe—"

Ricker was on his feet now, eyes writhing. "Mebbe be damned! You're a blundering fool, Kendall. You blundered when you rode off and left Rance Morton for dead. I told you to finish him! Today you grab that wagon train, kill old McDowell an' fetch the loot here—through the snow. Come dawn the law will be trailing you. And the girl—"

"She's mine, Dean," Kendall cut in hoarsely. He was afraid of Ricker.

He showed it. "You used to wouldn't let me get near her. But I got her an' I'm goin' to keep her!"

"Take her an' be damned, Kendall!" Ricker grated. "I'm through. You're going to buy me out."

Both men were standing now, facing each other. Kendall grumbled something. They started toward the door that would lead into the front room where the other outlaws were waiting. The smashing of a window-pane spun both men about, their hands clawing frantically at guns. Then their movements froze. Like two statues they stood, the fear of death suddenly drenching their eyes.

"Rance Morton!" Galt Ricker gasped incredulously.

Morton's head and shoulders were framed in the broken window against the black night. His leveled pistol poked into the room. A startled shout came from the front of the building. Boots clumped on the floor. Still Morton didn't shoot. He watched fear give way to terror in the two men's eyes. Watched their hands start a downward sneak toward their guns. Then Morton's hate-choked words came like the clash of gun-barrels.

"Hell's callin' you two skunks! Here's the payoff for killin' my brother an' McDowell!"

RICKER'S gun was clear of leather when Morton fired. Gun-thunder shook the room, deadening Kendall's bellowed oath and Galt Ricker's pain-filled scream. Kendall's frenzied shot burned Morton's cheek. Then the big ruffian was on the floor, rolling, dodging, triggering wild shots at the window. Through the black smoke, Morton glimpsed Galt Ricker's slow fall to the floor. Ricker was clutching his chest with both hands, blood seeping through his white fingers. His black eyes were like the sightless eyes of a corpse. He fell just as the door caved in and renegades poured into the room.

Morton whirled, ducked from the window as a hail of lead ripped out into the night. Cursing because he had failed to kill Kendall, he ran blindly toward the corner of the building. Tumult suddenly filled the outlaw camp. Kendall's men came roaring into the street.

Morton rocked back on boot heels as the dim figures of men came churning out of the night straight toward him. One of them saw him, whooped triumphantly as his gun flamed. Then they were all shooting as Morton fired once and ducked toward the shelter of the corral. One of the renegades fell into the snow, but the others came on, their hoarse curses filling the night.

Lead sliced through the snow all around Morton. His life seemed charmed. One bullet seared his ribs, half whirling him as more lead smacked into the poles of the corral.

"Hyar he is, Kendall!" rose a cry. "Headin' fer the corral. Kill him!" screamed the shrill voice.

With the blood-lusting pack at his heels, Morton vaulted over the corral gate. With his back to those oncoming men he could almost feel the hot breath of death on his neck. Only the black night was saving him.

Across the muddy corral he raced. The mules, frightened by the firing, squealed, milled through the darkness about him. Flying hoofs spattered him with snow and mud. Here was a new threat he hadn't counted on in his desperate escape—being trampled to death by the milling animals.

Back of him the outlaws' fire had dimmed. From all sounds they were ripping open the corral gate, freeing the mules so they could search the inky shadows inside. Death trap! Morton realized that now. His heart pounded in his throat. Men were al-

ready spreading. In another moment they'd have him surrounded.

There was one alternative. A desperate chance, but he had to take it. Of a sudden Morton found life sweet. He didn't want to die. Strange, but the thoughts of Marsha struck through his spinning mind. Gritting his teeth he reached for the tops of the poles in the corral. With a mighty swing he pulled himself up, hooking boot heels on the top. Then he was astride the fence. The outlaws spotted him. Their pistols crashed above the rumble of the stampeding mules pouring out the gate.

MORTON struck the ground back of the corral running. Ahead lay a low shed. Off to one side a thicket of brush jutted from the snow. Like a hounded coyote, Morton made the brush, flattening himself on the ground as Kendall's men rounded the corral.

"He's in the shed, boys!" an outlaw snarled. "Smoke him out!"

There were at least six of them. Fortified with bottled courage, they charged the shed, their guns streaking flames. Safe for the moment, Morton lay still, his ears throbbing with the uproar. From the main log building came the furious bellow of Ferg Kendall, cursing his men, offering them a thousand dollars for Rance Morton's hide.

As the charging men reached the shed, Morton came to his feet. His only chance now lay in getting a horse. For in another hour or two it would be dawn and by then Kendall would have every cabin in the village searched. Guards would be posted all along the rim of the valley.

In long strides Morton plunged through the darkness around the corral. Chances were the searchers would never expect him to backtrack. He reached the rear of the saloon again without meeting anyone. In front were the saddled horses. But the street out there swarmed with renegades. They were searching the smaller cabins, their swing lanterns dotting the night like fireflies.

A man appeared at the corner of the saloon. Morton's blood turned to ice. Instead of running he trotted toward the man, tense for the roar of the searcher's pistol, the sickening sensation of lead smacking into his chest. But the shot didn't come off.

"Hey there!"

"It's Bill," said Morton. "They find him?"

The man lowered his drawn pistol. Curiously, he peered through the darkness as Morton came up. A startled curse broke from him, to die a groan as Morton's gun-barrel slashed down. Then Morton was leaping over the man's body, making a final spurt around the saloon building toward the street.

The rein-trailed horses stood in a shaft of light. There were men on the sheltered porch, taking orders from Kendall. The searchers back at the shed were scattering, and all along the night-gloomed street came the blobbing red lights of the lanterns.

Bent low, Morton reached the street. In one flying leap he hit leather. The horse beneath him snorted and leaped off the ground. That quick bucking was all that saved Morton from instant death. On the porch of the saloon, Kendall spotted him. With a roar to his men he fired as Morton's horse took off down the street in mighty leaps.

Something like a white-hot poker struck Morton's left arm. Biting his lips against the pain, he hipped around, loosening the last of his loads at Ferg Kendall. Morton knew he was missing. Cursing bitterly, he clutched the kak horn as his fear-

struck horse plunged on down the black street.

It seemed that every outlaw in the valley had spotted him now. Frantically, they were shooting. But like a black arrow, horse and rider swept on, unchecked.

"Stop him! He's gittin' away!"

Morton barely heard Kendall's fog-horn yell. Senses spinning, it looked to Morton as if the night were alive with dancing red lights. There were black shadows. White snow. The vague impression of black cabins sweeping past him. The whine of lead about his head. The terrible pain in his left arm and the feel of warm blood on his stiffened fingers.

He was almost out of pistol range now. Remembering Marsha and Sully, Morton's head jerked erect. Just ahead of him, off to the right, was Marsha's cabin, its windows yellow with light. From the shadows of the porch two figures suddenly came running toward him. Their arms were waving. One of them was shooting, not at Morton, but at the outlaws who had swung ahorse to take up the chase.

"Rance! Rance!"

That cry came to Morton like a scream slicing through thunder. Like a bolt of lightning it struck Morton that Sully and Marsha hadn't escaped! They'd stayed here to face the inevitable end with him.

Through a swimming blur, Morton saw Marsha's pale face. There was Sully beside her, whooping and shooting at the charging cavalcade behind him.

"Sully!" Morton yelled. "Damn you, I told yuh to leave!"

"Leave, hell, son! I was willin', but Marsha bucked!"

Morton knew the oldster was lying. He knew it even as he kicked free of the stirrups and leaped to the ground. The racing animal tore on. Stumbling to his feet, Morton felt Marsha's arms about him, heard her crying his name. Then the three of them were dashing back inside the cabin.

They slammed the door, bolted it. Marsha had the lamps extinguished as Kendall and his renegades began shooting, circling the cabin like Apaches. In the darkness of the cabin, Morton saw Sully at one of the windows, his crouched little figure limned against the lesser gloom of the night outside. Sully had a rifle to his shoulder and he was shooting, barking curses of defiance that were lost in the din.

Marsha reached Morton's side. Her face seemed to swim toward him as if she were without a body. There was no fear in her stark eyes, only the look of a person who knows she is doomed to die and is willing to meet the end bravely. She had two pistols in her hands.

"Take them, Rance. I'll light a candle and reload."

He took them with his right hand. His left arm hung limp at his side. He felt Marsha's arms about his shoulders, was dimly conscious of her eyes clinging to his.

"I—I love you, Rance," she said, voice muffled by the firing. "I just want you to know, before the end."

CHAPTER VIII

The Battle

GUNPOWDER choked the front room of the cabin. Bullets whammed through the smashed windows, thudded into the log walls. In one corner, Marsha McDowell knelt, reloading the guns. A candle burned on the floor in front of her. In its fluttery rays her fingers flew at the task.

At two opposite windows, Morton and Sully crouched, aiming and firing at the circling figures outside in the black night. Blood from a bullet

gash in his forehead streaked Sully's bearded face. Unmindful of the flying lead he whooped and swore and killed!

"Come an' git it, yuh sons of hell!" he bawled. "We're whuppin' 'em, Rance! Another down squealin' with lead in his belly. It's gittin' grey in the east. They'll skulk fer cover come daylight!"

His long-barreled Sharps roared. During Morton's absence, Marsha had shown him where her father secreted guns, powder and balls, in a box beneath the plank floor. Now they were making use of those guns.

Powder grimed Morton's face like grease. In the dismal candle-light his face was a haggard mask. Pain wracked his entire body, and the same terrible drowsiness kept stealing over him. The blood-dripping fingers of his left hand touched the floor.

The deafening gunfire beat into his ears. He emptied one hot-barreled gun, grabbed up a second. Through a dancing haze in front of his eyes he knew he was taking toll. Three times he had seen riders spill from the backs of their racing horses.

"Rance!"

He turned. Marsha was beside him. She saw the blood on his left hand for the first time.

"You're wounded, Rance!"

"Nuthin' much, Marsha."

AS he continued firing, she ripped up his sleeve and bandaged the wound to stop the flow of blood. The courageous fighting spirit of this girl stirred Morton with new strength. In this awful moment when death was so close he found himself comparing her with Helen Stockton. He suddenly realized that it was Marsha he loved—not Helen.

Marsha was the kind of girl he had dreamed of as being his mate through life; a girl who would die fighting at his side if occasion demanded. He knew he had never loved Helen. He'd only been blinded to her real nature by her dazzling smile. Yet he had promised Helen he would return to her. If he lived, he'd have to go back.

He turned to Marsha and she took his two empty guns. He saw the vital hopelessness in her eyes.

"How's the powder holdin' out, Marsha?"

"All right."

"Marsha! We're—"

"We're done, Rance," she cried. She handed him another pistol. "The last of the powder is in it, Rance."

Morton turned, saw Sully crawling out of the shadows toward them. His one eye looked like a red marble. In his right hand he was gripping his bowie.

"I heard her, Rance," he yelled. "Still got my old meat slicer an' she don't need no powder. When they come through the door—"

He stopped as Ferg Kendall's harsh voice lifted above the din outside. Already black shadows were lifting from the snow-blanketed valley and dawn was at hand. A hundred yards off to one side of the cabin in some brush, Ferg Kendall and some of his men lay hidden in a shallow arroyo. The horsebackers had stopped circling.

"Morton!" Kendall yelled above the dwindling fire. "Yuh hear me, Morton?"

"Shore, I hear yuh, Kendall," Morton shouted.

"Got a proposition fer yuh, Morton. Accept it an' yuh go out of the valley hide-whole. Refuse an' yuh go down from belly lead. Give us the gal. If yuh don't she'll be killed anyway. What's yore answer, Morton?"

Morton laughed bitterly. "My answer is short, skunk-bait! Go to hell! We'll die fightin'!"

In the gloomy cabin, Morton forced Marsha to the scant safety of a cor-

ner as Kendall's order for attack rang out to his men. Through the shattered windows, Morton saw those crouched, charging figures swooping down upon them. Thunder of guns again echoed over the valley.

"Take the door, Sully!" Morton gritted fiercely. "As long as yuh can stand and fight for Marsha!"

The only way they could ever silence Sully was to kill him. Knife in hand, he faced the plank door, a hideous grin on his lips. In one corner, Marsha leaned weakly against the log wall, a rifle barrel gripped in her hand. Her face was white and her lips moved as if in prayer.

At one window, Morton stood half exposed. Lead nipped at his jacket, but he didn't flinch. Through a red blur he saw one group of renegades within thirty feet of the cabin. Already some of them had reached the front door, were smashing it with rifle-butts

Then Morton was shooting. Two of the charging outlaws sprawled in the snow. One of the remaining men stood head and shoulders above the others. A brawny, bearded giant of a man, a pistol in each hand. Ferg Kendall! Just as they were about to plunge from view, Morton fired. He thought Kendall staggered and fell at the corner of the cabin. He wasn't sure.

Sully was yelling and Marsha was screaming, but it came to Morton as if miles away. He tried to fight off the enveloping shadows, the terrible weakness in his legs, but he couldn't. He felt himself sinking slowly, slowly. Suddenly, Marsha was kneeling on the floor beside him, trying to tell him something.

"Rance! Rance! They're coming!" she exclaimed.

The outlaws she meant, of course. Yet she was acting strangely. Above the firing outside lifted a mighty rumble like the beat of huge drums. Horses' hoofs! The front door was still intact! Sully was dancing up and down, swearing and laughing like a man suddenly out of his head.

"The soldiers, Rance! By the leapin' fires of hell, the bluecoats have come!"

HIS cry seemed to echo. Dimly, from outside came the startled, frenzied shouts of Kendall's men.

"The bluecoats! It's the damned soldiers from Santa Fe!"

The beat of horses' hoofs swelled and carbines roared. Straight toward the center of the village the mounted soldiers rode, fifteen or more of them, downing the remaining Kendall men before they could grab horses and escape. Blood stained the snow where crumpled bodies lay in lifeless heaps.

A red-faced Irish corporal in a great blue coat led the charge. He'd ordered no prisoners taken. Maybe it was because a gun-guard on the stage that Kendall had plundered was the corporal's partner.

About the last Morton remembered was Marsha bending over him sobbing: "We're safe, Rance. We're safe."

Morton knew the coming of the soldiers meant little hope for him. Ferg Kendall and Galt Ricker were dead. With them had gone Morton's last hope of clearing his name of the wagon train robbery and murder.

It was daylight when Morton regained consciousness. Sunlight streamed into the cabin through the splintered windows. A roaring fire in the fireplace warmed the bullet-pocked room. The smell of cooking food was in the air, the smell of burnt powder was gone. From the kitchen came Sully's voice, in a none too tuneful version of "Susannah."

Morton thought it was all a continuation of the troubled dreams he'd been having. Marsha's face came out of a blur. Then a man's face, whose

presence made Morton forget the ache of his wound.

"Hub," he murmured incredulously.

The man was Hub Stockton. His fat face was flushed, eyes beaming with joy. He and Marsha were on the floor beside the pallet where Morton lay.

"It's me, son—alive an' kickin'. The seat of my britches is wore thin from the ride. But when the Rangers said—"

"Rangers?"

Bewildered, Morton sat up. "What about the soldiers from Sante Fe? Kendall? Ricker?"

"Kendall an' Ricker are dead, son," Hub Stockton said grimly. "The other renegades are wiped out. The soldiers left an hour ago with the bodies. You got both Kendall an' Ricker, who were responsible for Tag's death. But before Ricker died he confessed to everything, clearin' yore name."

There were a lot of things Hub Stockton explained during the next few minutes. Suspecting Galt Ricker's crookedness, Stockton and a couple of Rangers had trailed him out of Franklin two nights ago. They had arrived in Hideout Valley shortly after the soldiers.

"I never believed for a minute that yuh killed the guards an' robbed the wagons, Rance. Ricker maintained yuh done it. Him sayin' that first made me suspicious of him. Those wanted posters of you, an' the reward? Ricker was responsible for that. He wanted to make things look right. It was from the money of that freight goods—*my own goods*—that he used to buy me out of the freight business."

Hub Stockton introduced Morton to the two Texas Rangers as the men stomped into the room. After the two lawmen joined Sully in the kitchen, Stockton said:

"McNelly's men, Rance. Guess now that the job is done we'll be ridin' back toward Franklin tonight." He paused. "Jest wonderin' if yuh're goin' back, or goin' to stay."

Morton felt Marsha's eyes upon him. And it was an odd look Stockton gave him. The fat oldster seemed to want to tell Morton something more, but couldn't.

"I'll be goin' back with yuh, Hub," Morton said quietly. Stockton joined the other men shortly after that, leaving Morton and Marsha McDowell alone. It was just before Sully came into the room with two plates of food that Morton said:

"I've got to go back, Marsha. I've never told you before. But there's a girl back there, Stockton's niece—"

"Helen?" asked Marsha softly.

"Sully told yuh?"

"No. Mister Stockton, while you were sleeping."

The day passed slowly for Morton. Late in the afternoon, Tonca, the loyal Indian woman, rode into the valley. Stoically, she took her place as servant in the cabin as though nothing had happened.

It was past the middle of the afternoon before Stockton and the Rangers had horses packed and were ready to ride south. Morton, his left arm in a sling, drew on his fur coat. Rest and warm food had restored his strength, but it was with an ache in his throat that he was leaving. Marsha had avoided him much of the time since morning. Now, as he was preparing to leave, he looked up and saw her in the kitchen doorway. The others were all outside.

SHE came up to him. She could smile a little, but couldn't hold back the tears. When she offered her hand, he took it. His throat was too full of words. More than anything else in the world he wanted to take her into his arms and tell her he loved her. Now that his name was clear they could have lived happily in Hideout Valley. It was wonder-

ful ranching country—a valley like Morton had always hoped to find.

"Good-by, Rance."

"You goin' to live here now, Marsha?"

"Yes, Rance," she murmured, pathetically. "It is home to me. I love this valley."

She stopped. And Morton looked up to see Sully in the kitchen doorway, a sad little smile upon his lips.

"I do, too, Rance," he grunted. "Think I'll jest stay. See, by gumie, Marsha an' Tonca need a man about. An' what do yuh want me to do with them cows of yores out back?"

"They're yores, Marsha," Morton told her.

With that he went outside and mounted. The two Rangers, Hub Stockton and Morton rode through the deserted log village. Just before climbing the timbered slope at the far end of the valley, Morton looked back. Marsha, Sully and the Indian woman were standing on the front porch of the cabin. Morton waved to them and Marsha and Sully lifted their arms in farewell.

When Morton turned he saw Stockton's pale eyes upon him.

"Yuh don't need to go back, Rance."

"I made a promise, Hub," Morton said with finality.

They rode on in silence.

CHAPTER IX

Hideout Valley—and Peace

THE first night they camped in a timbered shelter. The second day they were out of the snow country, deep in the mesquite, sandy wastes near Franklin.

Hub Stockton said little, worry clouded his eyes. At times Morton was certain that the fat oldster wanted to tell him something. But on each occasion when Stockton got ready to speak he'd stop.

His actions puzzled Morton. He was even more perplexed the morning of the third day when they reached Franklin. Leaving the two Rangers in town, Stockton said:

"Let's ride to my house, Rance. We can talk there."

They found Hub Stockton's sprawled 'dobe home deserted. Helen was gone. There was a note lying spread on the stand table in the front room. Stockton picked it up in a hand that wouldn't hold steady. Slowly, painfully, he read:

Dear Uncle Hub:

I am taking the stage to Saint Louis, leaving this country forever. Don't worry about me, for I'm not worth it. If you ever see Rance Morton alive, try to explain to him what a fool I've been, and may God forgive me.

Galt Ricker and I were secretly married shortly after Rance left. I didn't know until it was too late what a scoundrel he was. Word came today that he was killed. Being his wife and heir, the freight line he tricked you out of falls to me. I now leave it to you, the rightful owner, and in doing this I hope to justify things a little.

Helen.

It was several moments before either man spoke. There was a mist in Stockton's pale eyes, a tired smile on his lips.

"I suspected all this, Rance," he said huskily. "Somethin' told me she was preparin' to run away, but I couldn't make myself tell yuh. I want to shake yore hand, son. As the Mexes say, *vaya con Dios* on yore trip back to the valley."

Morton left almost immediately on the trail back to Hideout Valley. Somehow he rode a little straighter, and there was a different look in his eyes. The look of happiness a man finds when he lives like a *man!*

He rode into the valley just at sunset. Shadows fell in pools over the timbered hills. The snow was beginning to melt. The fragrant smell

of spring was in the air. The very breeze seemed to whisper of peace and contentment, as God wanted it in these hills. Smoke rolled lazily from the chimney of Marsha's cabin. From some far off knoll a buffalo wolf bayed to the closing day.

Marsha heard Morton ride up. She came running out the front door of the cabin, crying and laughing like a girl sometimes will. Morton slipped from his horse and lifted Marsha off the ground with his right arm. The light of love was in their eyes.

"Rance!" she cried softly. "You've come back."

Words were such futile things. Morton said: "Forever, Marsha, forever."

Their lips met and held. And they weren't aware of Sully sitting on the front porch watching them, grinning, until he coughed.

"Knowed yuh'd come back, Rance," he said, "but I didn't look fer yuh till tonight."

"How'd yuh know, Sully?" Morton laughed shakily.

"By gumie!" snorted Sully. "Mebbe I only got one eye, but I ain't blind. That's why I jest stayed. I didn't want that there long ride fer nothin'. An' don't ask questions, nuther. Tonca's got some beef an' biscuits a-cookin' that'll make yore mouth water. Come on in 'fore yuh both catch yore death of cold. Come mornin' the four of us'll ride into Sante Fe. I need a jug an' it looks like yuh two need a damned good parson."

And they did.

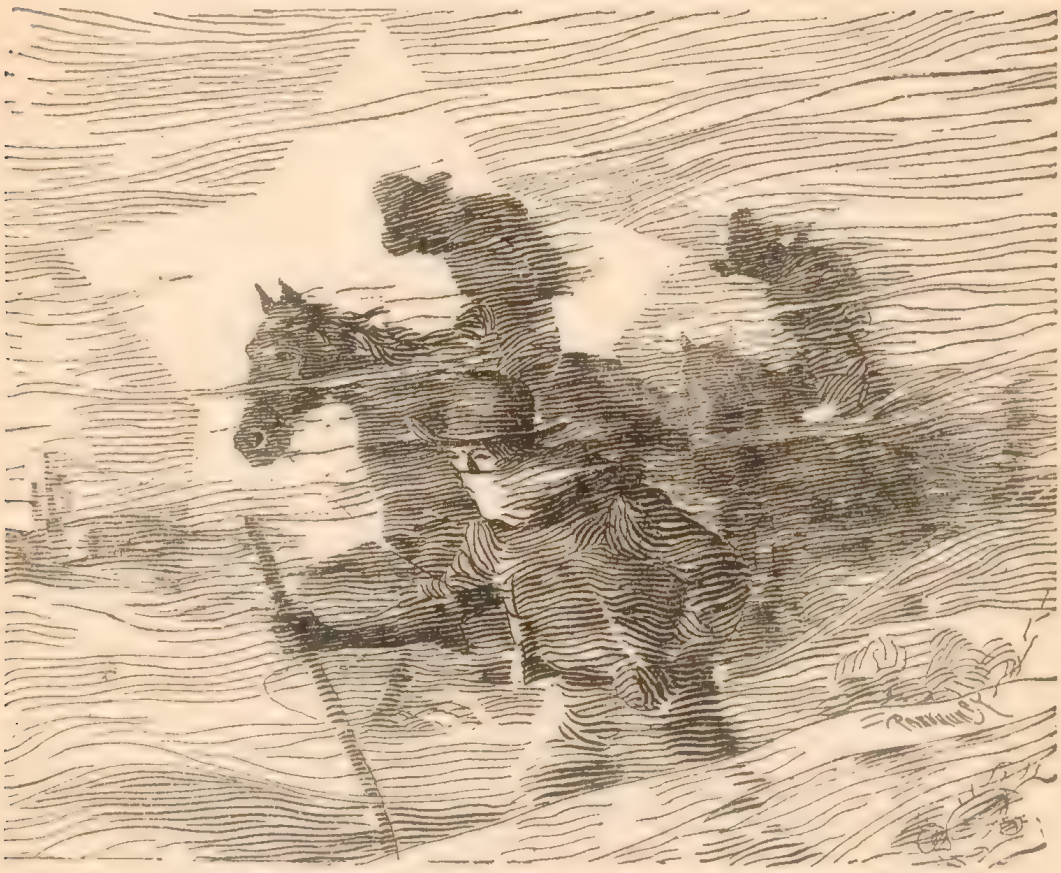
IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

GUNFIRE DEAL

A Novel of Range Tragedy

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

DESERT STAR



Blindly the three men moved through the sandstorm

The Blazing Gandy Desert Provides a Steaming Backdrop when Sheriff and Hunted Man Stage a Grim Duel with Nature's Weapons!

By DON ALVISO

Author of "Killer Sign," "Hangman's Pay," etc.

SHERIFF KEYES told himself that he must be getting old, to let Flint Gardner get away from him like that. Never before had a man come into Keyes' domain and committed a depredation and got away with it. Flint Gardner wasn't going to get away with it, either, Sheriff Keyes told himself grimly.

"Never heard of such a thing!" Keyes grumbled to himself, as he emerged from his office. He crossed the boardwalk to where his horse was waiting, untied the horse from the hitching-rack and heaved his powerful bulk into the saddle.

"Walkin' right into that saloon thataway, shootin' Magill down in cold blood, holdin' the crowd back with his smokin' gun and lickin' outa there like a whirlwind! Giddap, Bozo!"

He prodded big buckskin Bozo into a steady gallop, scowling straight ahead, as the horse carried him down the main street of Tolville. The sheriff was still grumbling to himself as he and Bozo left Tolville behind. Flint Gardner must think he was pretty smart, Keyes reflected bitterly, to come right into Keyes' home town and headquarters to pull a killing like that, the minute the sheriff's back was turned.

TWO miles from town, at the crossroads, Keyes stopped at the little wayside store kept by Bill Weed and his wife. He bought a meager supply of light rations, and Weed looked at him curiously.

"Goin' on another foray, Sheriff? Yuh wouldn't be goin' after Flint Gardner again, would yuh?"

"I would!" Keyes said curtly. "And this time I'm gittin' him. That coyote has played hide-and-seek with me long enough."

"Ain't headed for the Gandy Desert, be yuh?" persisted Weed. "Seems I hear tell yuh went thataway before."

Keyes gave Weed a dry smile. "Yeah, I've been thataway before, Bill, and this time I'm comin' back with Flint Gardner."

The sheriff turned his back on the man and went on out to his horse.

He put his food in his saddlebags and went on, his brain intently occupied with the puzzling setup he faced. Fourth time he'd gone into the Gandy now after Flint. And it would be the fourth time he'd stopped to question Edith Starr, too.

Keyes frowned and shook his head. Funny about Edith Starr, it was. People weren't any too kind in what they said about her; some of them weren't even decently kind in their treatment of her, either. If Edith wanted to live there on the western edge of the Gandy Desert, he guessed that was her business. That place where she lived, people in Tolville called it the "desert woman's place."

Well, she'd done things with it, Keyes reflected, as Bozo settled to the long journey. First time he'd gone there looking for Flint Gardner, her place had been nothing but a waterhole with a tent pitched beside it. He guessed shrewdly that she'd come there after Flint had taken to the desert. But he hadn't known, and he couldn't elicit any information from Edith Starr. He'd searched that desert from end to end, he was certain, but he had found no least trace of Flint Gardner. Then he'd come back to Tolville and searched every other place again where Flint Gardner might be in hiding, without success.

That search had occupied him for nearly three months. Then he'd gone into the Gandy Desert again. He couldn't rid himself of the idea that Gardner really was hidden there somewhere.

That time when he stopped at Edith Starr's place, he found that she had transformed the waterhole into an oasis. A rude cabin had been erected, composed of weather-beaten timbers salvaged from deserted homesteaders' shacks and wagons abandoned along the punishing trail. The waterhole had been cleaned out and lined with clean flat stones that must have been brought from afar, since there was nothing near at hand but sand and cactus and scrub brush.

Edith Starr had come to the door at the sheriff's knock, and he had asked her gruffly, "What yuh doin' livin' here alone, woman?"

But for all his gruffness he had regarded her with respect. There

was something about Edith that commanded respect, he'd noticed. Not a haughty dignity, but a bearing and reserve that seemed to say to all men:

"What I have is yours if you are in need, but my life and my affairs are my own."

She had looked up at him with steady dark eyes and answered: "I live here because I like it, Sheriff." A little smile had lighted her oddly sad face. "There's something about the desert that I love."

"Couldn't be Flint Gardner, could it?" Keyes had prodded.

HER smile had grown. "If you think Flint Gardner is hiding in the Gandy Desert, Sheriff, why don't you go in and find out?"

"I been once," Keyes had answered brusquely. "I'm goin' agin. No woman ain't built this shack and carted them stones all the way over here all by herself."

So he had gone on into the desert again, and he had stayed there this time for three nights and four days, and when he had come out his horse was barely able to keep traveling, and he had stopped at Edith Starr's place to ask for water.

He'd got it, and food and shelter for the night, and the next morning he'd gone on into Tolville with a sincere, "Thank ye, Ma'am," for Edith Starr. Then he'd searched the other places again, and gone into the desert again, and searched the other places once more.

All of which had taken him nearly a year, and still he hadn't found Flint Gardner, but neither had he given up. He was morally certain that Gardner had never left the county. If that were so, he was fully persuaded at last that the man had to be in the Gandy somewhere. And he wasn't going to give up this time till he found him. But his thoughts were more than disgruntled, they were a little uneasy, as the miles fell behind Bozo's pounding hoofs and the desert came continually nearer.

Uneasy about Edith Starr, he admitted. Lots of things had been said about Edith Starr in the last year. Some called her home "the desert woman's place" still, and some called it something else. Her cabin seemed to have become a sort of haven.

Men went into the Gandy Desert looking for gold, many men, and some never returned. Some who came back spoke of a strange, wiry man they had glimpsed wandering over the barren waste. Some claimed to have picked up worn trails and tried to follow them, finding the trails like the man, shadowy and elusive, flickering out before their eyes, never to be sighted again.

But one and all, when they came out of the desert, many of them having found the trip too much for them, making the crossing barely by drops of water and ounces of strength, staggering in, often half mad from thirst and the searing heat, they found ready shelter and food and drink at the hands of Edith Starr.

Down-and-out prospectors knew her generous aid; some who had money paid, and some who could have paid did not. But they all came to call her the "desert star," and it was because of these weary travelers that folks said the things they did about Edith Starr.

Sheriff Keyes frowned again, as Edith Starr's cabin came into sight in the distance, a huddled shape there on the desert's face, surrounded by cactus garden and little trees she had got from somewhere and watered faithfully.

There was no way for Keyes to know that, hours since, after he had left Weed's store, a stranger had ridden up and dismounted and gone into the store to speak to Bill Weed.

To Weed's greeting, he had said tersely: "My name's Norton. You

don't happen to know the whereabouts of Edith Starr, do you?"

Bill Weed's wife had spoken up sourly. "Oh, that desert woman! You lookin' for her, Mr. Norton?"

Norton had ignored the contempt in her tone. "I am."

"She's got a place over the edge of the Gandy Desert," Mrs. Weed had said dryly. "I don't know jest where. I ain't never been there, and I wouldn't go there. Neither would my husband."

Norton had eyed her sharply. "Thanks. I think I can find it from those directions. Perhaps I'll run across some fellow on the way who's been there."

"Yuh'll probably find a-plenty!" Mrs. Weed had sneered, but Norton had merely turned away, gone back out to his horse and ridden on.

AND Sheriff Keyes approached the desert woman's cabin without the least idea that a stranger was riding hard upon his trail, so close that he could have seen the dot of the approaching horseman back there on the sandy waste if he had turned to look. The lawman drew up before the cabin, swung to the ground and knocked on the door.

Edith Starr opened the door, and at the first glance he saw that this was not the Edith Starr he had known before. Her calm was gone, her habitual dignity harried by some consuming worry or fear. She almost gasped in relief when she saw Keyes, thrust out a quick hand and drew him into the cabin.

"Sheriff! I'm so glad you've come!"

"So!" Keyes eyed her intently. "Yuh've never been right glad to see me before, knowin' why I'd come. I'm on the same business agin, I'm warnin' yuh, Ma'am."

"It's different this time," said Edith Starr, her voice even and cool.

Sheriff Keyes' mind worked swiftly. Had she quarreled with Flint? Likely. Seemed as if the thing had gone on about as long as it could. He'd seen such happenings before; an outlaw's woman shielding and protecting him until she turned against him and gave him over to the law.

"Yuh ready to admit that Flint Gardner's hidin' in the Gandy?" the sheriff asked, his tones sharpened.

"I can't do anything else. I'm worried about him. I must have help. I've never told anyone before, Sheriff, never even admitted that I knew Flint was hiding out in the Gandy. He has come and gone at night, every two weeks, or three at the most, even during the worst sandstorms. He'd never let anything keep him away longer than that. And now —now it's been over a month that he hasn't come. Nearly two months. I know something's happened. He may be out there hurt, or sick, or even—dying!"

"I thought yuh knew the Gandy?" said Keyes.

She drew a sharp breath, and hopelessness was in her eyes. "I do, for a way. Flint and I have been over the western half of it together, but he never would let me go beyond the Painted Rocks. I grew desperate, and went in alone last week, afoot. Flint took both burros with him last trip. I couldn't take much water, only what I could carry, and I had to come back."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "And so yuh want me to go in and find him? Yuh know what's waitin' for him if I do find him, don't yuh?"

Edith Starr nodded, her face whitening. "I know, Sheriff. But even that wouldn't be so bad as his slowly dying out there. I'm fighting you no longer. I'll do anything I can to help you find him, now."

"Then yuh kin tell me where to look," said Keyes bluntly.

She drew a long breath, passed her hand before her face, and looked at

him with eyes that were wells of despair. "You—you go on beyond the Painted Rocks to a place—"

She cut the sentence short, her eyes widening. Outside there came the sound of an approaching horse, ridden hard. Edith Starr whirled and leaped toward the door, and swung it open as the horse came to a sliding halt in the sand outside. The sheriff's hand went to his gun, and he took a step in her direction—but only to see the stranger, Norton, fling himself from the horse and come running straight toward Edith Starr.

The man started to hold out his arms to the woman, then he saw the sheriff standing there, saw the glitter of the star pinned to the sheriff's left shirt pocket. He dropped his arms and stopped short in the open doorway. The woman gave one long look and stepped back. He followed her into the cabin. Neither said a word.

KEYES cleared his throat. "Well, I'll be on my way, Miss Starr, if yuh'll jest finish tellin' me what yuh had to say."

Edith Starr shook her head. A queer excited glow had come into her dark eyes.

"No! I've changed my mind, Sheriff. I don't want you to find Flint now. I—I think now I can find him for myself. Good evening, Sheriff Keyes."

The tone was a final and cool dismissal. Keyes gave one boring glance at the stranger, then he went swiftly out of the cabin. He got on his horse and rode away. But he rode only far enough to be on the windowless side of the cabin, then he swung off his horse and slipped back afoot and halted against the cabin wall, his head close to the thin boards of that wall.

He heard the woman saying: "I didn't think you'd ever come."

"I came as soon as I could learn where you were," answered Norton, though Keyes did not as yet know that was the man's name.

"How did you find out?"

"From a man in El Paso, Edith. He had been prospecting in the Gandy. He stopped here one evening when he was about done up, and you gave him food and water. He told me about the 'desert star' of the Gandy, and he told me about what happened to Magill in the saloon at Tolville."

"I—see," said Edith Starr.

"Yes. Is Flint really out there in the desert, Edith?"

"Yes, he's out there, Norton. There's something wrong. He's been gone too long. He told me this would be his last trip in. He had discovered a ledge up there in the Painted Rocks, richer than any he'd ever found before. He'd brought most of the gold out, was bringing the last of it this trip. We had given up any hope that you'd ever come. We were going away, far away, Norton, and leave all this behind."

"How could I come," returned Norton, "when I didn't know where you were? Why didn't you write and let me know?"

"I—I couldn't!" The woman's voice thickened, broke. "After—after—"

"That's all past!" Norton cut in sharply. "You weren't to blame. The blame was Magill's, and he's paid. You shouldn't have let your pride keep you from writing. But we'll just forget that. Now, I'm going after Flint."

Sheriff Keyes drew quickly away from the wall and hurried back to his horse. He had learned what he wanted to know. Flint Gardner was there somewhere among the Painted Rocks. He mounted the big buckskin hastily and when Norton emerged at last from the cabin, Keyes and Bozo were merely a moving speck on the desert.

The ways of the desert were strange, Keyes was thinking as he rode. A man might live there close to it all his life and know little of its devious trails, and another man, as though born to the sun-seared waste, could follow its courses with ease. Flint Gardner was a born man of the desert. Must be, to keep life in him and stay there in the Painted Rocks. A hell hole, that spot was!

It was a day's ride from Edith Starr's cabin. Keyes figured he had just struck it right. Already the sun was down, the air was cooling. He would travel all night, rest the next day after he'd captured Gardner, and return the next night. He and the horse would probably be suffering for water by that time, unless there was water among the Painted Rocks. It was not a pleasant prospect to face.

He frowned at the thought. Water in the Painted Rocks? Why, there must be! And Flint Gardner must know where it was, or he couldn't stay there and work at getting out his gold for any two weeks at a time!

Keyes' square jaw set grimly. Well, if there was water there, he had no need to worry about having the precious fluid to see them all safe back from the Gandy. He settled into the saddle, setting himself for the ride, gaze ahead, waiting patiently for the miles to slide by and for the first light of day to break over the waste of sand.

And the dawn came, and the sun flamed like a molten ball in the sky, and the blistering forenoon was growing old when the Painted Rocks came at last in sight, a jumbled mass of broken segments thrusting up endwise from the solid bed of the formation below. The sheriff eyed the peculiar giant stones intently as he stopped to rest in the shade of a towering overhanging ledge.

He had skirted this stone wilderness once before, the whole of it covering several square miles, looking as though a giant hand had split and hewn huge slabs of stone and stood them there like tenpins. He had turned back at the forbidding sight, convinced that this was one place in the Gandy where no man could hide and live. But here Flint Gardner hid and lived after all!

Keyes rested his horse and himself and drank. He swabbed the horse's nostrils and mouth with his handkerchief wet in water, and went on. Taking a zigzag trail across the domain of the Painted Rocks, he rode slowly, his gaze intent on every nook and crevice, saving the big buckskin as much as possible. He doled the water out jealously, and by afternoon he had to stop and wait for the cool of evening, but he did not turn back. There must be water among the Painted Rocks. When he found Flint Gardner he would find water, and he was not going back without his man this time.

WHEN the evening desert breeze began to drive the scorching heat from the air, he went on. Somewhere Flint Gardner would have a campfire. And already the moon was up, would soon make the scene almost as light as day. But he rode all night, and saw no slightest flicker of a campfire. And in the morning the merciless sun drove him to the shadow of a ledge.

His canteens both were empty. His mouth was parched, and the buckskin's tongue was hanging. Keyes thought a little dizzily of starting back, of trying to make a run for the one waterhole between the rocks and Edith's cabin before it was too late. Then he realized grimly that it was already too late. He wouldn't be able to reach that waterhole now. Sun or no sun, he'd better go on to where Gardner was, and Gardner's

waterhole, or he'd never be able to reach that, either.

He went on afoot now, leading the horse, leaving the shade of the ledge behind. It wasn't of much use, anyhow, in this inferno. He realized that he was growing a little hazy as he wandered among the rock columns, and he thought his eyes were tricking him when he discerned a well-defined trail leading gently upward between the monstrous rock columns, turning a little as it went.

He stopped and stared, and shook his head. No, he wasn't seeing things. The trail was there. He turned into it and followed it, stumbling a little,

followed it for what seemed time without end, twisting, winding, turning. Then he thought he heard a groan, the sound of a human voice ghastly in its distress and despair.

He stopped so short that he staggered, and stood there listening. Yes, there it came again. His ears were not deceiving him. He dropped the reins of his horse and went slowly ahead, and came suddenly to the entrance of a recess so cleverly carved in stone by Nature's hand that a thousand men might have passed it by unseeing, did not the sound of a human voice stay their feet and lead them aright.

A FEW yards beyond the entrance into the recess Gardner's burros lay almost upon one another, shot dead. Flint Gardner himself lay on a pallet on the rock floor of his hideout, a pallet made of mesquite.

The sheriff stared down at him, swaying on his feet. "Hurt, Flint?"

Flint Gardner nodded weakly. "Leg's busted. Slipped on the rocks, goin' after water."

The sheriff licked his dry lips; rather, he tried to. His voice was hoarsened almost to a croak. "Where yuh go after water here?"

Gardner leered at him with a ghastly grin. His speech was blurred, almost unintelligible. "Wouldn't you like to know!"

"Yeah," answered Keyes grimly. "Been two nights and a day since I had a real drink. And my hoss—"

"Sorry—for the horse," croaked Flint Gardner. "Guess we're even, Sheriff. Me—busted leg, can't even get—gun. You—two good legs—gun—like to take me back and hang me—no water. Can't get no water—I won't tell!"

Keyes gazed at him with haggard eyes. "And so?"

Mockery lighted Gardner's drawn, white face. "And so, looks like we stay, unless—"

His gaze widened, leaped beyond Keyes. He saw another man slip noiselessly into view, eyes on Gardner's face, and the look he saw on that face made the other man halt and back quietly away until he was completely hidden by the rock wall.

"Unless we make a deal?" said Keyes thickly. "That what yuh tryin' to git out, Flint?"

"You—you're guessin' close," Gardner answered. "I ain't got much strength left. Give me word—your word, you'll take me to Edith Starr, and I—I'll show you—water."

"Show me?" Keyes shook his whirling head. "You—busted leg—"

"Been crawlin' to water," said Flint's hoarse croak. "Had to shoot burros. Couldn't get 'em water—couldn't see 'em—die—thirst. Is it—a deal?"

"Yuh mean I let yuh go, after we git back to Edith Starr's?"

"Yeah."

The sheriff shook his head. "No deal. If there's water that close, where you could crawl to it, I'll find it, and take yuh back."

"Don't be—damn fool!" Gardner's swollen face managed a leer. "Rocks —tricky."

Keyes ignored the warning, swayed, and lurched past Gardner's prone figure, rounded a towering column, and passed from Gardner's range of vision. Nothing human was in Gardner's view for an instant, then suddenly the man he had warned back with a glance stepped into sight and bent over him.

"Nort!" Gardner whispered hoarsely. "So you come!"

"As fast as I could!" answered Norton. "As soon as I knew. I have a little water left, Flint. Edith almost weighed me down with it. Leg pretty bad, old son?"

"Mashed," said Flint Gardner's dry croak. "These rocks—balanced, man's weight can roll 'em over. One topples—a lot more come down. That damn — fool sheriff — wouldn't listen—"

The hoarse croak stilled and Norton straightened, at the sound of a heavy crash of rock on rock.

"He's done it!" said Gardner. "Better go see."

Norton leaped across the rock floor, flashed out of sight, was gone a few moments, then came staggering back with the sheriff's inert body over his shoulder.

"Dead?" asked Flint Gardner.

"No." Norton laid Keyes down a few feet away. "Just battered up and knocked out. Where's the water, Flint?"

Gardner managed a ghastly grin. "Right here, under my bunk. Just—slide me over."

Norton moved him gently. Gardner's pallet of mesquite and sticks, he saw, was laid across a crevice in the grim rock, and in the crevice a trickle of water flowed soundlessly.

"Okay, old man!" He smiled at Gardner. "We fill the canteens, then we start back. And every man for himself. Do we leave him here?"

Flint Gardner's tortured eyes went to Keyes' unconscious face. "Hell, no! Man, ain't he? Stickin' to—his job. Play 'er as she lays."

Norton nodded, and rose. So they started back, with Flint Gardner upright in Norton's saddle on Norton's horse, clutching the horn, with the sheriff tied into his own saddle, delirious with the heat and moaning in pain. Norton walked, leading the two horses. He walked through the glaring sun of the blistering day. Weary, exhausted and half sunstruck, he walked through the chill of the desert night. He walked through daze and heat and hope and despair, till the sandstorm struck with blinding fury. He would have given up then, but he heard a voice, a voice hurled wildly into the hissing, blowing blast of sand and wind.

"Norton! This way, Norton! *This way*, Norton!"

And in the whistling deluge he turned "this way."

He heard a woman's voice sobbing broken words:

"Saw you coming—storm broke—came to meet you—"

He felt hands reaching. He followed—

SHERIFF KEYES came out of black oblivion, thrust pain from him, sat up, and stared about. Lamplight glowed. Faces cleared. He was in the cabin of Edith Starr. And over there sat Edith and the stranger Norton, watching him. He was on a bunk, somehow. And over there, on another bunk, Flint Gardner. The sheriff opened his mouth. It wasn't dry any more. He smiled gauntly at Flint Gardner.

"Well, hell! Huhn! I—I git it. Yuh got anything to say, Flint?"

Gardner smiled gauntly, too, but his eyes were steady, eased, clear.

"Not much, Sheriff. Only, you and the folks at Tolville been thinkin' wrong. This fella is Edith's husband,

Norton Starr. I guess—I ain't got no more to say."

"I'll say it," said Edith swiftly. "Down at El Paso, Magill showed up when Norton was away on business. I'd known him before I married Nort, Sheriff. I trusted him. He told me some terrible things about Nort, things that were not true, but he made them look true, and he wanted me to go away with him. I was so stunned and hurt that I went, but when he tried to make up to me, I began to suspect. I found that he'd lied, smoothly, cunningly, but he'd lied! I wouldn't have anything to do with him. But he made people believe that I did. His smooth lies again! And I was afraid to write to Nort. He—Magill—he'd wrecked my life with his lies, and Flint followed him and killed him. Flint and I came here and made a place on the Gandy, always hoping that Nort might hear and know the truth, and forgive me for ever doubting him."

"But—" Keyes sat up, staring at Flint Gardner. "Why was it Flint's business, Ma'am?" He scowled heavily. "He's dyin'. We might as well git all the truth now."

"He is not dying," said Norton Starr tersely. "He won't even lose his leg. I've taken care of him, just as I've taken care of you. That's my business. I'm a doctor. Flint is Edith's brother."

THE sheriff raised his eyes to Edith Starr's face.

"Well, well, well!" he said softly. "Looks like Flint Gardner is gonna be the only fella that ever got away from me! Jest couldn't catch up with that hombre, nohow!"

But there was no regret upon his gaunt face. There was a smile. And in his brooding eyes was a light of content. For he had a vision, a vision of Norton and Flint going on to a finer and happier trail ahead, guided eternally by a desert star.

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A Dogie Dean Novelet

"Stand up, yuh yellow coyote, an' take yore lickin'!" Dogie cried

Under Cover

The Ramblin' Range Detective and His Pal Hackamore Jones Visit the Town of Regata and Uncoil New Hemp for a Brace of Brand-Blottin' Lobos!.

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Steer's Holiday," "Marked Men," etc.

CHAPTER I

Seasonin'

THE public corral was across the way from the Cicada Saloon. Dogie Dean sat on the top rail, rolling a quirly, high heels tucked under a pole. His mild, calflike eyes watched the growing of a small crowd that gathered, as two bull-terriers neared each other, sidling up, growling and snarling, like bitter enemies. The short hair lifted on their muscular necks, they taunted each other as they advanced.

There was an alley on either side of the saloon. One dog came from the left, the other from the right, as if they made stage entrances, conscious of their audience. They were of the fighting, pit-bull breed, time-worn warriors, scarred on muzzles,

chests and ears; they were well matched.

Hackamore Jones, Dogie's partner in their unusual but successful profession, had been in Regata a week, looking over local conditions with his ear to the ground. He was waiting for Dogie, the brains of their combination, to arrive from settling up their last deal.

"Them two dawgs," said Hackamore "look like they wanted to tear out each other's windpipes, but they're friends. They'll put on a show for their own amusement, the entertainment of the crowd, an' the profit of Sam Pond, who runs the Cicada. He's a square hombre with a sense of humor, likewise advertisin'. He owns the dawgs, turns 'em loose when there's any sort of a gatherin' in town."

"THEY look sort of ancient," said Dogie.

"Their teeth is wore to stubs. Mebbe they got an old feud on account of some lady-dawg that once made 'em rivals," Hackamore explained. "I figger that is past history. The idee is they put up a scrap. Pond separates 'em, final, takes 'em inside and the crowd follers. They've chosen fav'rits. The crowd buy drinks and the dawgs git extry chuck. Everybody's happy, especially Sam Pond."

The bull terriers closed in, clinched with evident zest, mouthing for a hold. The crowd made a ring about them. To the old-timers in Regata this was an old gag, but still amusing. And those to whom it was new got a thrill out of it.

Dogie saw that neither dog was getting hurt. They might have an ancient hate, but they had clashed before, they knew each other's limitations. It was sport to them, as to the spectators.

The swinging doors of the Cicada Saloon opened and a man came out, a burly, clean-shaven man with more stomach than he should have carried for a cowman, as his clothes proclaimed him.

He evidently had more than he could handle properly, on his feet, or in his head. He toted two six-guns. He wore a checked shirt and a vest made of chipmunk skins. His batwing chaps were studded with silver conchas. His five-gallon Stetson had cost him a lot of *dinero*.

Dogie sized him up for a bit of a blowhard, a bit of a bully, one who wanted the center of the stage. He looked like a spender and a bragger who was confident as all hell.

"It's a fake," he proclaimed loudly, with the hint of a hiccough. "I'll give 'em something to fight for."

He produced a can from his pocket, shook the contents vigorously over the muzzles of the two dogs where they lay clinched and growling.

Those on the inside of the crowd stepped hastily back as the red pepper assailed their noses. The dogs parted, sneezing, coughing, pawing desperately at nostrils and eyes, choked and blinded, in an agony that upset all their mock antagonism into real anguish. They rolled in the dust, and the man waved the can with a loud laugh.

"I'll show the world," he cried while the dogs rolled and the ring of onlookers broke up.

"The lowdown lizard," said Hackamore.

Dogie Dean said nothing. His six-gun spoke for him. It came leaping from his holster to his hand like filings to a magnet. It spat and barked, and was back in the leather again between eyewinks.

The can of pepper jumped from the fingers of the burly man, with its top blasted off, its contents scattered. The man got most of it full in the face.

The bull terriers, scurrying back into the alleys, had nothing on him

when it came down to dried, grained and sifted tabasco, venomous as hot lead, stinging and biting, making the big man dance and paw and roar like a bear attacked by bees.

Dogie dragged on his quirly, exhaled. A little smoke oozed from the open end of his holster. He looked at Hackamore with a vague surprise in his big brown eyes. The tall, range-weathered Texan leaned weakly against the poles of the corral, shaking with controlled mirth as two men came out of the saloon and took the burly one inside, cursing and stamping.

"You shore seasoned the soup that time, Dogie," Hackamore said. "That was Hank Bushman, of the H B Spread. The man I was talkin' to you about. You roused hell with a rocket, hombre. He'll be rarin' for yore blood an' hide."

"He's welcome to 'em, providin' he kin collect. Any two-legged lizard that pulls a stunt like that on two harmless dawgs deserves what he give 'em. Let's you an' me go across an' hist us a drink. I could use one."

FOLKS stared at the two cowboys as they sauntered across the street. Some were doubtful as to who had fired, so fast had Dogie leathered, so quietly had he slipped from top-rail to the dirt, and, above all so meek was his appearance. The gaunt, tall Texan, leathery of skin, weather-lined, his grey eyes steady, looking like a range-boss just off trail, appeared far more aggressive, but his holster was tightly studded.

Dogie looked like a rannie who having quit, or been fired, at spring round-up, was trying to make his pay-cheek last out until fall. He was not exactly shabby, nor crestfallen, but he did not look like an outstanding success at anything.

His ears stood out wide from his round, smooth face. His eyes were mournful, with the expression of a strayed calf looking for its ma. He was less than medium sized and a trifle bow-legged. His rigging was well worn, there were rope calluses inside his hands, his fingers were long, slender, supple. All in all, he was in direct contrast to Hackamore.

One man approached them as they neared the batwing doors of the Cicada. He, apparently, had not missed anything, for he spoke directly to Dogie.

"You shore kin shoot," he said admiringly. "Mebbe it's jest as well, seein' Bushman don't never like gittin' the worst of it. If yuh're his pardner," he added to Hackamore, "I'd advise you to side him, close. Bushman ain't what yuh'd call milk-fed, he trails with a hard crowd."

"I aim to," said Hackamore.

"Me an' my pard, Hackamore Jones," Dogie spoke up, "appreciate yore advice. We don't hunt trouble, as a rule, 'cept in the way of bisness, but I hate to see two game dawgs worried by a cur. We would admire if you would join us in a drink; my name is Dean—mostly called 'Dogie' Dean. Some claim I look like a stray calf, but that warn't the reason I got the name."

"My name is Ike Frazier, I own the I F outfit. It lies about seven mile out of town, southwest. Glad to see you boys out there. I ain't hirin' this time of year, as a rule, but come out anyways."

"Shore will," said Dogie. "We ain't exactly lookin' for jobs right now."

The Cicada was not much of a saloon in its appearance, within or without, but it was spacious, there were two aprons at work behind the bar as indication it did a good business, and the liquor was also good. Hackamore knew, he had already sampled it.

Bushman was at the far end of the counter with two men who had brought him in. One of them looked

venomously at Dogie and Dogie figured that this man had seen him shoot, or had been told so by a reliable witness.

He was a breed, lean and swarthy, wearing a modified charro costume. He might be a boss *vaquero* or a boss *mescalero*. He was certainly a cut above the ordinary peon. Dogie knew his type, cunning and vindictive, with all the vices of the mingled races—American, Spanish and Indian—and none of their virtues. The type was willing to work with a *gringo* for gain, but at heart he hated all white men.

One of the aprons hovered solicitously over Bushman, who was clearly held in importance at the Cicada. The bartender had suggested lard and Bushman was cursing him for the cure, that seemed only to have rubbed-in the agony deeper. His eyes were swollen and closed, his cheeks wet with the only tears his kind would willingly shed.

Frazier, Dogie and Hackamore lined-up at the bar. The second apron greeted Hackamore in friendly fashion, was more reserved with Frazier, though he showed he knew him.

Hackamore was renting one of the bedrooms above the saloon, mainly because no other accommodations could be obtained. A railroad would be coming through Regata before very long, a main line replacing the branch single track, to tap a country that promised highly. The town was filled with boomers, trading in corner lots and business prospects.

Dogie bought a round, then Frazier, then Hackamore. The apron set them up for the house. They mellowed with the good liquor. Frazier nudged Dogie.

"The other chap with Bushman is figgerin' on startin' somethin'. He ain't as tricky as the breed. His name is *El Garra*, meanin' 'The Claw', an' it shore suits him. He's Bushman's ramrod. Some claim he's a full pardner. But the hombre with the flat nose an' the lumpy ear is Simmonds. 'Slug' Simmonds, he calls himself—claims he used to be a fighter. He shore ain't no cowhand. He acts as strongarm for Bushman.

"Once in a while, if some pug comes along, he'll fight him. He usually wins, but he ain't what you'd call a purty fighter. Look out for him, he don't tote a gun, let's everybody know it. Mainly, I reckon, because he can't handle one too good."

Dogie nodded, ordered another round. He had taken in the flat-nosed Simmonds already. He also noticed that several men had drifted in the backdoor, were now forming a group about Bushman; they plainly were his pals. Dogie figured they had been sent for.

CHAPTER II

"Name Yore Pizen!"

SLUG SIMMONDS came and stood back of Dogie, whom he outweighed by at least thirty pounds.

"Listen, sharpshooter," he said, "yuh damn' near blinded my boss, or he'd handle this himself. Yuh're jest a runt, so I'm takin' you over my knee an' whalin' the seat off yore pants, gun or no gun."

The others were edging, grinning, hoping for a better show than the dog-fight. El Garra was among them.

Dogie shucked his gun, laid it on the counter, asking Frazier to take care of it.

"Start yore spankin'," he said quietly. His eyes lost their mild glow. Hackamore's were glancing.

The ex-bruiser did not like the way his play had been called. He was quicker of action, once started, than of thought. He knew himself well backed, and he had bragged.

While Dogie's hands were above the bar, Simmonds swung a fast blow that started at the hip, out of

Dogie's sight. He saw it first as a blur in the dingy mirror back of the bar, confused by the bottles that were stacked there. He ducked, but the slog struck him on the side of his head, sent him down to the sawdust. Frazier's hand went to his gun-butt, but Hackamore checked him with a word. *"Wait."*

Dogie had rolled with the blow, though it was hard enough to floor him. The crowd backed off, giving Simmonds room. He jeered at Dogie.

"You ain't hurt," he said. "I jest cuffed you once. Git up, before I kick yuh up."

DOGIE raised himself on one elbow. Simmonds sent a hard kick at his ribs. It was in midair when Dogie's legs shot out, his feet clipped about the bruiser's ankle, brought him down with a crash. He let out a howl of agony, sat up, clasping his ankle.

"You broke it," he cried.

Dogie was on his feet again. "I jest cuffed you," he mocked. "Stand up, yuh yeller-marrered polecat, an' take yore lickin'."

The crowd roared. It was not in sympathy with Dogie, but it did not seem overstrong for Simmonds. They were on his side because of Bushman, and because they thought that side the stronger.

Simmonds got slowly to his feet. He limped a little, but he was not disabled.

"I'll beat yuh to a pulp," he said. "Them dawgs wouldn't tech what I'm goin' to leave of yuh."

Frazier said something, but Hackamore held him back with hand and arm.

"Watch this," he said. "This is goin' to be good."

It was good. Simmonds started in with an error, traded it for a hit, and he was on the receiving end. He reached for Dogie's collar, moving swiftly, and then he walked into something that, to him, was like an explosion of giant powder against the broad, flat point of his jaw. It was a right-hook, that seemed to have the lifting force of a mule kick. Simmonds thought every muscle in his neck was torn loose and then he was smacked again, twice, on chin and—the second wallop, rat-tat on the first—split his lips, and knocked the gold crown off a lower front tooth.

He was off balance, and he went down with a thud, flat on his back, with the crowd staring down at him. He lurched to his feet, bawling, spitting blood. Sharp pain racked his head and the space between his shoulders. He saw Dogie, more like a game-cock now, than a stray calf, balanced on the balls of his feet, waiting, cocked to punch. He came darting in, ducking a wild swing, side-stepping an upper-cut that might have torn his head off—if it had landed.

Simmonds was paunchy and the liquor he liked did not do his heart-action any good, neither did the punch above it, which followed one in the pit of his belly. They made him reel backward.

He halted, bellowing like a madman, unable to grip the man he had derided as a runt, to land a solid blow on him. His haymakers slid off Dogie's shoulders as Dogie came in, stabbing.

Dogie's hard knuckles landed on his right eye, under the gorilla brow. Pain racked him, as vision vanished. It was like fighting a phantom, save that no phantom packed such punches, could place them with such precision and speed.

Smack! Thud!

He was down again, from right and left to his chin. He crouched on hands and knees. Dogie taunted him, a little out of breath, getting it back.

"Git up an' take yore lickin', yuh big hunk of meat."

"Git up, Slug! Eat him alive! He's small enough!"

Simmonds blinked up at them. They were deriding him, poking fun at him. They had been afraid of him once—all of 'em, damn' 'em!

He reared to his feet, unconscious of Dogie's sportsmanship. With his own good eye he saw that Dogie was also grinning. He barged in blindly, clawing for Dogie's throat, to choke him, and snap his spine like the stem of a clay pipe. He grasped at a shadow and splattered out a spurt of blood from his mouth.

Then Dogie closed in, like a weasel to the kill—to heart and belly, belly and heart again. Well-placed blows landed right where the ribs parted, pounding through the fat of his flaccid paunch. It was many a day since Simmonds had trained, and it took more than training to offset the fast and furious battery of Dogie's blows.

Dogie was set for every one of them, his timing perfect. He was mostly bone and muscle, what flesh he had was like vulcanized rubber. His blows came fast and furious, swift and telling as the punches of a steel riveter.

Simmonds was pawing at the air. A right flashed through his broken guard, through, and up to his already battered jaw. His coordination between will and nerves was severed, like a cut telegraph wire. The floor seemed jerked away from under him, then it flew up to smash him in the face.

Simmonds lay there like a log in the sawdust. His feet kicked feebly, then it was all over. Dogie looked at his knuckle, cut by the gold-topped tooth.

He wiped his palms on his handkerchief, then he retrieved his gun from Frazier.

"Next gent wants entertainin', I'll choose my own weapons," he said, looking around him. There was a calendar on the wall depicting a blond and buxom damsel, holding out a foaming mug of beer.

Dogie's gun barked twice. Blanks appeared where the blonde's blue eyes had looked alluringly.

"No lady should be allowed to see sech goin's-on," said Dogie. "How about another drink? Make it fer all hands this time, includin' the gent on the floor, he might need one."

He tossed two gold coins on the bar.

"In case they don't cover the damage," he said, "I'm stayin' here with my side-kick, Hackamore Jones of Texas. We aimed to do a li'l cow-tradin' here in Regata, we still do. Name yore pizen, hombres, no hard feelin's, on my part."

THEY came to the bar, all save Bushman, El Garra, and the still out Simmonds. They stepped over him to line-up. While they drank, Dogie, Hackamore and Frazier downed their whiskey, and departed.

The three sat in a stall at Ching Foo's Oriental Café. Frazier had decided it was too late for him to get back to his ranch for supper, made himself their host.

"If yuh're figgerin' on buyin' beef steers," he said, after the steak and onions, "yuh'll find Bushman givin' yuh plenty opposition. He's smarter than you might think, though mebbe not so slick as El Garra. Bushman come here right after they started in grading fer the new railroad; he bought the old Four Slash spread. It was run down, but it was cheap, an' it suits a man who's doin' more buyin' an' sellin' than breeding."

Dogie gently kicked Hackamore under the table, and the Texan reddened through his tan. He was filching lump sugar from Ching's service-bowl, something Hackamore could never resist. He held on to the cubes he had lifted, dropped them into his pocket.

"I allus make up fer it in the tip," he muttered.

Frazier did not seem to have noticed. He went on.

"Bushman got the jump on all of us with the contractors. Sellin' beef to the construction camps is darn good bisness, when you can get it. We ain't got a show-in. He undersells by margin we can't meet. Of course, he don't have as heavy expenses as some of us. He don't have to worry about winter feed, for one thing. He sells under his registered brand, H B. He can prove that, of course, and he has bills of sale, mebbe, once in a while. It all seems reg'lar, 'cept the price. He must be makin' plenty, the way he spends it."

"WELL, there's no harm lookin' round a spell," said Dogie. "Me an' Hack jest put over a deal. You folks havin' much trouble with rustlers?" he asked casually. He knew the answer. It was what had brought the partners to Regata.

"Considerable. Biggest losers are me an' Perry, of the Bar P, I reckon. We've got the biggest outfits. An' this country was hand-made, to order, for stock thieves."

"Bushman lost much?" Dogie's tone was still casual. He saw Hackamore making marks on the tablecloth with the end of his spoon, kicked him, harder this time, frowned at him. Hackamore looked injured, but he was not. He was far more ashamed of himself than he had been swiping the sugar, as he smoothed out the marks he had made, subconsciously.

Frazier had put the beginning of an idea in his mind, but he knew Dogie was leaps ahead of him. Hackamore put his hands in his pockets to avoid temptation, leaned back.

"Likely has," Frazier answered. "He ain't registered no formal complaint. He's registered with the C.P.A., same as the rest of us, account of his brand, but he don't belong to our local organization, bein' trader, ruther than breeder. He ain't our sort, some ways. He likes to spend his spare time an' cash in saloons an' *cantinas*. Gambles considerable, plays around with the wimmen. Of course, that's his affair."

Dogie nodded. He fancied Frazier spoke with reservation and he changed the subject. After Frazier rode off to his ranch, Dogie and Hackamore had a nightcap at the Cicada.

There was no sign of Bushman or his outfit in the main barroom, but Dogie had a strong notion that a crowd, to whom drinks were being carried to a back room might be Bushman's private party. If so, he was quite sure they were notified of the presence of Hack and himself. But nothing happened and they went upstairs by an outside, covered, stairway to the second floor, to their room. Hackamore thrust a lump of sugar in his mouth, started to haul off his boots.

"I know what yuh're thinkin', Hack," said Dogie, "but I don't think this is a good place fer talkin'. I reckon *this* is what was in yore mind?"

He took a letter from his pocket, sketched something on the back of the envelope with his pencil, showed it to Hack, who nodded agreement. Then Dogie erased the designs he had made, using the rubber end of the pencil.

"Looks like a swell idea," said Dogie. "Might be hard to prove. How about that bed, is it inhabited?"

"I ain't been scratchin' none. The springs ain't so much."

Dogie looked out the window. They were at the back, the window looking over waste land, stacked behind the saloon were empty kegs and cases. Dogie leaned out, surveyed the wall of the building.

"I ain't so shore these quarters

is over healthy," he said, "there ain't no bolt. If we leave the key in the lock, it 'ud be plumb easy fer a slick chap to use the right sort of pliers an' look in, when it was figgered we was asleep. Easy to chuck a *cuchillo*."

"We could move the bed," suggested Hack, yawning. "Move it over against the door, fer that matter."

"Too much trouble," said Dogie as he fished in his pocket and brought out fence staples, with a little coil of fishing line. He tapped in the staples with the butt of his six-gun, led the line through them, and attached it to the handle of the big pitcher of water in the washbasin, after he had emptied it. The door opened inward. Dogie tested his burglar alarm and, satisfied, took off his clothes, down to underwear and socks, turned in beside Hackamore. They had strapped gun-belts and holsters to the head of the bed, on either side.

IT WAS within an hour of dawn, at the darkest, quietest hour of the night, when men's senses have retreated furthest into unconsciousness, that the crash came. The pitcher shattered, with noise enough to wake the dead.

Hack slid out of bed, gun in hand, with the speed of a startled gopher, and the silence of a ghost. He opened the door, with the handle of the pitcher still attached to the spring, glided out into the passage. There was one oil-lamp burning, turned down, perhaps for economy.

The passage was empty. At the rear there was, he knew, a back, inner stair, leading down to the kitchen, back of the saloon. He thought he heard a slight scuffling on the stairs, and headed for the place.

Hackamore Jones might be sluggish of brain, compared with Dogie, but once he went into action he wasted no time. He could ride anything he could fork, and he could handle and understand the ways of the range and its critters, whether they went on two legs or four.

It was curious, he thought, that the racket had aroused nobody. It meant that those who used the rooms above the Cicada very much minded their own business.

Dogie had gone to the open window, like a streak. Hackamore was halfway to the back stairs when a door opened.

"What's the trouble, pardner?" a man in underclothes stumbled out into the passage, and demanded, sleepily. "What was that racket?"

He barged into Hackamore, who steadied him against the wall.

"Mebbe you know," he said disgustedly. It looked to him as if this harmless-appearing individual might have been planted to blunder out, and block the way. The scuffling on the stairs had ceased.

The man laughed. There was whiskey, raw on his breath, which meant little in, or above, the Cicada.

Berang!

The report of a heavy-calibered gun blasted the night. Hackamore let go the man. He knew that was Dogie shooting, not likely to waste a cartridge.

Still, nobody else appeared. Hack bet himself a new Stetson that plenty were listening in.

"Say, that sounded like a shot," said the man.

"Did you hear a shot?" Hack asked him. "Mebbe we're both havin' nightmares, *amigo*. Let's you an' me go back to bed."

He knew the intruder had long ago reached the bottom of the stairs, got into the open, and Dogie had been watching. Hackamore left the man who had barged into him, and returned to the room.

"There'll be a Mex limpin' some tomorrow," said Dogie quietly. "He'll likely stay in bed, an' keep out of

sight. I've a notion it was one of El Garra's *amigos*. It was a Mex, all right, in soft *zapatos* an' a short *jaqueta*. He ran like a jackrabbit out the back door. Dodged in among them cases, but he was draggin' his leg. I must have got him through the calf. Didn't want to kill him. But if there ain't blood-sign outside, well, I missed, that's all."

"You don't aim to look for it?"

"I aim to finish my sleep out. They won't bother us again tonight, Hack. I figger they'll use different tactics, seein' we're sort of thorny to handle. They'll know we're talkin' of buyin' beef-cattle, Bushman'll be interested. He might even want to sell us some. We'll git up right early an' ride out to the I F. We'll get there in time fer breakfast, an' a talk with Frazier. That café last night was sort of open. Me, I trust Chinks, but I like to know which side they're on.

THEY had breakfast in the I F chuckhouse, though Frazier bawled them out for not coming to the ranchhouse. His riders were out for the day and headquarters were deserted, save for the choreboy, a superannuated rannie knotted with rheumatism, who had worked for Frazier's father.

Dogie commenced the talk by handing Frazier some letters and clippings. He explained, as Frazier looked them over.

"Me an' Hackamore," he said, "are private cowdicks. Sometimes problems come up that the C.A.P., local sheriffs an' their deputies can't handle, so we try to solve 'em. We've been purty successful, mebbe lucky. We use what you might call modern methods. We aim to outsmart the rustlers, and if they're smart they're apt to think rangedicks dumb. We work on a contingency basis. If we don't make good we pay our own expenses and call it a day. Mostly, we deliver."

Frazier looked over the documents again, handed them back.

"It looks like you usually do, by these," he said. "We've got nothing to lose by takin' you on. If you make out, our local organization 'ill pay five hundred dollars reward. Me an' Perry between us 'll boost that another five hundred, see he's my brother-in-law. We've lost plenty but we're the top outfits an' we shore can afford that, to stop our losses. Is it a bargain?"

"It's a go," said Dogie.

"Got any ideas?"

"One, and we're ready to gamble on it." He did not mention anything about the overnight affair. That he regarded as personal with him and Hackamore. He asked for a sheet of paper and sketched on it, as he had once before with Hackamore, the symbols of the I F and the Bar P brands.

"A man," he went on, "moves on this range, buys himself a spread. He's already contacted with the construction camps to sell them beef at a low price. Lower than anybody else could come nigh touchin'. The butchers want the cheapest, long as the quality's good. They ain't above makin' a li'l' easy *dinero* themselves on the side.

"Now, this hombre is plumb liberal. He kin afford to be, if he's stealin' the beef."

Frazier nodded, his face grim as he looked at the sketch.

"The man is smart. He may likewise have a slick pardner, who may likewise be his rodman. So he moves in, havin' looked the ground over. He knows he's got to satisfy the brand inspector, or be able to show bills of sale. He finds these brands belong to the biggest spreads an' he fixed one for himself that is plumb easy to fake from both these brands. He registers the H B brand, which fits his initials an' seems reg'lar—if H B *are* his initials, if Bushman *is* his right name."

Frazier watched as Dogie changed I F to H B, did the same with Bar P.

"He steals yore primos, and doctors the brands. Once they're healed, an' they'll heal mighty soon an' easy, seein' no blotchin' is needed, he kin go out an' sell 'em in the open market. The price he gets is between him an' the butchers. It's likely a lot less than they'd claim he paid. They get the difference. *Sabe?*"

"I *sabe* it's goin' to be a hard thing to prove. You got to ketch him red-handed. I told you the terrain was hand-made fer rustlers."

"We'll get him—get him when he sells the beef. It'll be after the brands are healed an' he thinks he's in the clear. First move is you sell me twenty-five steers. Your brother-in-law does the same. Me an' Hack are makin' up a herd as traders. We ain't competin' with Bushman for the construction camps. We've got a market of our own. We pay you market price, for cash. It's our risk.

"Next—before we actually buy them steers, we pal up with Bushman. That may sound harder than it's goin' to be, but with him smellin' some cheap beef to be snaked from men he'd like to get even with, it won't be hard."

"I still don't see," Frazier said. "Of course, you can have the steers."

"It's simple," said Dogie. "It ain't ever been tried before, but it'll work. Here's how we'll handle it."

At the end of fifteen minutes Frazier smacked the table with his fist.

"It shore beats my time," he said. "Hell, I wouldn't have thought of that in a thousand years! No more would Bushman or Ed Garra. Wait till I tell Perry. Listen, you won't have to *pay* for them steers."

"Ruther do it thataway. We'll go see if we can square ourselves with Bushman, then we'll be back. This ought to be kept mighty quiet. Jest you, Perry an' us to know. We four can handle the work-end of it easy enough, I reckon, after they've been corraled."

"It's sorter early for the first drink," said Frazier, "but I've got some special Valley Tan. We might take a drink to bind the bargain. How about it?"

"We might venture it, I think. Hack an' me had sort of a restless night. It might soothe our nerves."

CHAPTER III

Lead vs. Steel

BUSHMAN, El Garra, Hackamore and Dogie sat together in the back room of the Cicada, in friendly talk, to all appearances. On the table between them was a bottle of Mexican *aguardiente,* that had never paid customs. It was fine brandy, the partners appreciated it. Dogie Dean had smoothed over the matter of the previous evening and Bushman seemed eager to talk business.

"Me an' my partner. we've got a market in mind," Dogie said, his voice mild and his big eyes matching its appeal. "Natcherally we ain't advertisin' it none. I'll say this, it ain't got nothin' to do with the railroad camps. I understand yuh've got a sort of monopoly there. My market ain't immediate. It looks like the price of beef is goin' up soon. I'll buy what I can, low as I can, hold it on range till we're ready to deliver."

Dogie did not miss the side glances between Bushman and El Garra, greedy, calculating, cunning, and shot with self satisfaction.

"I got the local market purty well sewed up," Bushman admitted. "Matter of fact I have a hard time gittin' all the beef I want for them, even by buyin' outside of what I raise. Them camps use a lot of meat. I'd sell you some steers myself right now if it warn't that I'm mighty

close to bein' short on my own contracts."

"I've sort of made a deal with the I F an' the Bar P," said Dogie. "The price warn't as low as I'd like it to be, but I'll make some profit. And there'll be more, if the market goes up. I reckon we'll buy 'em, go scoutin' to see what we can pick up here an' there. What we need is some place to hold our herd. We'd need a couple of hands to watch 'em. Mebbe you could suggest some place. I don't want to buy a ranch."

Bushman passed the brandy. He turned to El Garra. "How about it? Know of some place?"

To one who did not know their capacities Dogie and Hackamore were feeling their liquor. It was fiery and potent. Actually it might have been emptied into hollow gourds. The partners needed strong heads and stomachs in their business, and they had them, though Dogie ran his words together and Hackamore slurred his.

THE Mex winked at Bushman. "How about the senors rentin' the Loomis half-section," suggested El Garra. "Good water an' grass. The wire ees good. He could get eet cheap, I theenk."

"Good idea. Loomis died," he turned to Dogie to explain, "his widder went East and the bank took over. I think we could find you a couple of good, trustworthy herders."

Dogie kicked Hackamore under the table, gently.

"It sounds good to me," he said. "How about it Hack?" He rolled himself a quirly, helped himself to more brandy, waiting for Bushman's next question. It came promptly.

"Yuh'll use a road brand, I reckon."

"No, we'll have bills of sale from Frazier an' Perry. No sense ventin' an' rebrandin'. You lose weight doin' that, we've found. Steers don't eat good while their scars are healin'."

"I see you two know your bisness," said Bushman. He looked into Dogie's melancholy eyes, fancied them filmed with brandy fumes, and rated him as men were apt to rate Dean—an easy mark. Hackamore was a good top-hand, a first class cowman, but not over brilliant. "I'm shore glad to help you out. Sorry we had a li'l misunderstandin' to begin with. I ain't held it against you. I was full to the gills or I wouldn't have peppered the dawgs. What you did to Simmonds showed him up as a fourflusher. It was a favor to me."

"It's nice of you to look at it that way," Dogie told him, wondering which of Bushman's men was limping round, or lying in bed with a hole in his calf. "We'll fix up that Loomis deal, get our steers from Frazier an' Perry, an' drift. We'll be back in two-three weeks, mebbe with some more stock."

After the partners had gone Bushman and El Garra finished the bottle. They had strong heads also, but they were somewhat the worse for wear.

"The fools ain't goin' to vent or road-brand," said Bushman. We'll fake light with runnin'-irons after we run 'em off. They'll heal in ten days. Camp Three'll take 'em."

"Eet ees a peety," said El Garra, "that we deed not have the steers to sell them ourselves. Then we could get the price for them twice over. Eet looks *bueno, muy bueno,* but jus' the same thees one weeth the eyes an' the ears of *ternero* ees no fool. Do not forget he fights Simmonds an' weens, he shoots Juan een the leg. He shoots the can from your hand. Thees beeg Texan, mebbe he ees not so much a fool, either."

"We started that ruckus and it's over with. They're out for bisness and *dinero* talks. It's a cinch. We run their steers off the Loomis place with the two men we recommend.

An' then we are so sorry it happens. The herders will not be night-watchin'. Now, show me where there's a weak spot."

"Do not meesunderstan' me. I onlee say *mebbe* they are not so beeg fools. Once we have rebrand there ees notheeng they can do—notheeng. Then, mebbeso, we call the score even."

Dogie and Hackamore rode with Frazier and Perry, and with the two ramrods of those spreads, to Camp Three of the railroad construction. Dogie and Hack had been off on a trip that combined fishing with finding out where Bushman was to make his next delivery.

The doctored brands of the steers they had bought from the I F and the Bar P were well healed by now, if they had been stolen. The partners had not returned to Regata. Apparently they did not know those primos had been rustled.

Now they were branded H B. By the law of the range a brand was a brand, not to be disputed when it was clean. Now Bushman was offering, under his own registry and brand, eighty odd steers, high-grade Herefords. They used a lot of meat on the railroad and Camp Three was the distribution point. Bushman was on hand, with El Garra and four of his men who had helped drive.

BUSHMAN was surprised but not upset at the sight of the sheriff of the county. That official sometimes showed up on such occasions. The brand inspector was naturally present. Bushman scowled at sight of Frazier, Perry, Dogie and Hackamore when El Garra pointed them out.

"I do not like thees. I theenk they smell a rat."

"Let them, they can't find it. Those brands are perfect. The inspector's passing 'em."

"Steel, I do not like eet. Look, they are talkeeng to the contractor. Here comes the sheriff."

"Let him come. What in hell can he do? Or anybody."

The sheriff loped up.

"Bushman, there are two men here claim you are selling steers rustled from them off the Loomis half-section. They say you recommended it to them for a place to hold their herd."

"I might have, at that. You hintin' I run off them primos?"

"I'm tellin' you what they claim. The inspector wants to talk with you."

"Why not? It's easy settled. Jest let 'em pick out the steers, an' prove up on 'em. They're my primos, properly branded under my registry. A couple of rannies float in, claimin' they're traders, an' you fall for 'em. Strangers, an' crooks."

"I reckon they're not crooks, Bushman. I've seen their credentials. They're a private firm of range-dicks."

El Garra's eyes glittered. He swiftly crossed himself as the sheriff went ahead.

"I told you I deed not like thees theeng," he muttered. "Now there ees trouble. More better we go."

"Go? Go where, you yeller-livered greaser? Leave everything? Ain't you got any kind of 'guts? They're tryin' to run a ranikaboo on us. Laugh at 'em."

Bushman was half-laughing, half-angry as he and El Garra joined the crowd about the inspector.

"What's this about two half-baked cow-dicks?" he said. "They started trouble-makin' first day they hit town together. The tall one come first, then that calf-faced runt. Let's get this over with. Let 'em pick out their steers, if they kin, an' then disprove my brand."

The inspector looked at Dogie. He had seen the credentials and the affair annoyed and bothered him.

"It's up to you," he said. "If you

don't make good, Bushman 'll have you in a bad spot."

"It won't take long," Dogie answered cheerfully. "To start with, me an' Hack'll pick out half our steers. We kin cut out the rest later. We choose twenty-five, then you pick any five of them, an' we'll haze 'em into that chute. Then we'll demonstrate. Ready, Hack?"

THE crowd started as the two partners, aided by Frazier, Perry and their foremen, deftly separated twenty-five steers from the rest, herded them. They were all Herefords, prime steers, three-year-olds, their red-and-white hides glossy.

"Pick yore five, Inspector," said Dogie.

Puzzled, partly convinced, the inspector made his choice. The five were driven into the narrow chute, horn-roped, dallied to the posts so that their heads were held almost immovable.

"You take bleachin'-powder, which is chloride of lime," said Dogie, "mix it with carbonate and bicarbonate of soda. You kin buy the solution cheap. Diluted, it's used in laundries, some folks make it up for themselves. Makin' it strong it'll bleach anything in jig-time. I could turn that Mex's black hair white in one shampoo.

"So, when we buy those I F an' Bar P steers, we don't change the brands, havin' a hunch they might be run off an' faked to H B, but we put our own private brand on 'em, with the assistance of Perry an' Frazier. We used a stencil and bleached in I F an' Bar P, small but clear, on the one place a steer can't git at with its tongue, on the forehead. We kivvered that up, a li'l' later, with hairdye. We got a solvent for that. Soon as we wash their faces, you'll see the bleached brands show up. Now we'll demonstrate."

On the foreheads of three steers I F appeared, white under the dye, plain against the red of the natural hair. One of the other two Bar P.

"Plenty of natural white ticks an' spots on a Hereford," Dogie went on. "We marked 'em with the bleach where it wouldn't be noticed, but where we knew to look. That's how we cut out these twenty-five, an' can cut out the rest. You ain't in a hurry, are you, Bushman?"

The riders of Frazier and Perry, previously instructed, had stuck to the H B riders like pick-up men. The sheriff held up his hand.

"You got anything to say, Bushman, before I arrest you?"

"I got jest one thing to do, send this flap-eared, moon-eyed, amatoor dick where he belongs—to hell."

Dogie laughed at him. "I could shoot the buttons off that fancy vest of yores before you half shucked yore hawgleg," he said, "but Hackamore's attendin' to that."

"Hist yore paws, Bushman," drawled the Texan. "I've got you kivvered. If you don't want yore ribs ventilated, behave."

Bushman knew he was beaten, knew the handcuffs the sheriff was jingling were destined for his wrists. He was beaten in his mind by the coup Dogie had achieved. For once a brand was not a brand, when a hidden one was uncovered.

El Garra made his spirited pinto rear.

There was nothing else in the county could touch the pinto. It was a quarter-horse, with stamina enough to maintain the lead its sprint would gain. And there was mesquite not half a mile away. Once in that they would never find him. Mexes would hide him, get him away. But first he would kill this calf-faced *gringo* who had outwitted them.

A *cuchillo,* a weighted throwing-knife, came from his sash with the speed of a striking hawk. He jerked it underhand, sent it end-over-end

as he lay almost flat on the pinto's back. It flashed in the sun like a bolt of lightning.

It was meant for Dogie's heart and it ruined his somewhat ancient Stetson.

But Dogie had seen the lighting-like flash and his bullet had crashed into El Garra's brain through the top of his skull just as the *cuchillo* left his grip. There was the difference of a split second but it was enough for lead to conquer steel, to deflect the Mex's usually deadly aim.

El Garra fell from the pinto, his foot caught in the stirrup as the mustang wheeled and bolted, dragging its dead master whose lifeless fingers clawed at the dirt.

Dogie took off his sombrero, surveyed it ruefully. It was an old friend. He passed his hand over the top of his head.

"I been meanin' to get me a haircut," he said. "I'll have to get it trimmed now."

El Garra's *cuchiilo* had grazed Dogie Dean's scalp, and slashed through his abundant locks, actually cutting a tress of it.

"That," said Dogie, almost mournfully, "must be what you'd call a hairbreadth escape. I reckon there was Injun in El Garra. He come blame nigh to skelpin' me, at that."

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

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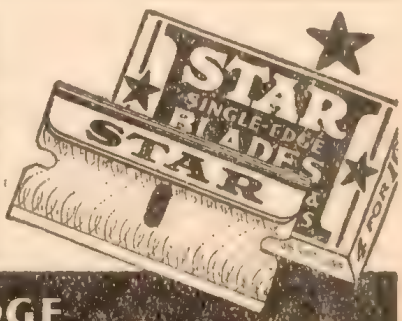
FREIGHT FOR SANTA FE

A Pioneer Trail Novelet

By J. ALLAN DUNN

"DICK" MERRILL'S STAR PERFORMANCE

Eastern Air Lines' ace pilot made the first non-stop flight from London to Floyd Bennett Field in 24 hours, 20 minutes! Another Star Performance is the way whiskers fly with Star Single-edge Blades! Star Blade Division, Bklyn., N. Y.



STAR SINGLE-EDGE BLADES 4 FOR 10¢

FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

Six-Guns Roar When Buddies of the Owlhoot Trail Come to a Fork in the Road!

"No sound!" Odett warned sharply

Outlaws Can Be Trusted

By ROLLAND LYNCH

Author of "Owlhoot Outcasts," "Lawman Without a Badge," etc.

TIME turned backward when Marshal Jim Odett looked through the dusty pane of his office window and saw the burly puncher quit his claybank at the hitch-rack. That man's likeness was on a poster on the wall. Odett stopped toying with his pencil and snapped it in two, forgetting the girl in front of him.

Across the spur-scarred desk from Odett, Margo Thoms was regarding him sharply.

"Does talk of our marriage affect you like that?" she asked, surprised. Then she turned around as the office door opened suddenly and the burly puncher stomped in.

Slowly, Jim Odett rose. He was a head shorter than the massive and

gun-draped outlaw. His shoulders weren't as broad, but were more trim. His torso was flat where the puncher's bulged. He was a sapling measuring to the burled oak. He was smooth-shaven and handsome in contrast to the bearded, florid features of the giant.

"Yuh've come a long way," Odett said grimly.

The puncher looked about the office slowly, insolently.

"Yeah, the trail *was* long," he drawled. "Nice layout yuh got here. I want to talk to yuh alone."

JIM ODETT paled beneath his bronzed face and turned to Margo. She signaled to the dodger on the wall with her blue eyes. She recognized the likeness—the beady eyes; thick lips; half moon scar on the right temple. Jim swallowed hard.

"I'll see yuh tonight, honey."

The girl looked puzzled as she noted how uncertain his words sounded. Margo shot a glance at the arrogantly indifferent puncher and looked back at Jim Odett. Her rich lips parted as if to speak, then drew into thin lines. She turned abruptly from the office, her trim levis and blouse-clad form sharply silhouetted against the afternoon light as she cleared the floor. There was an angry pound in the way her boots went up Corbin's boardwalk.

Odett turned to the puncher, fists clenched, knuckles white.

"Git out, Madero!" he snapped. "Git out before I run yuh in!"

Madero Nuys hooked his pudgy thumbs in his cross gun-belts and grinned crookedly.

"Shore," he smiled expansively. "Jail me. Mebbe this town of Corbin would like to know— Sit down, Jim!"

Odett stared at Madero for a moment, then dropped his glance. The appearance of this man turned back three years of his life. Three years during which he had buried the stigma of the owlhoot attached to his name. Three years of honest working here in the Silver Bow country of Montana. Three years in which he had elevated himself to the office of marshal. And tomorrow he was going to marry the banker's daughter. It was all smashed now.

The outlaw took the chair Margo had used and leaned his elbows on the desk.

"Tell me what yuh got in mind here?" he queried.

Odett kept staring at his boot tips.

"Nothing, Madero," he said flatly. "I only want to be let alone. I told yuh—"

"Yeah, yuh tol' me," interrupted the giant. "Goin' clean an' all that sort of trash. But there's somethin' behind yore workin' up from a blacksmithin' job to bein' marshal—an' marryin' the banker's gal. Yeah, I know all about yuh, kid. What's on yore mind?"

"Nothing!" Odett insisted desperately. "I was bad once, but that's behind me. Outlaws kin be trusted, Madero, when they turn over a new leaf."

"Not in my lingo," countered the killer. "I ain't never seen a rotten apple git so's yuh could eat it. I want to cut in, kid."

"There's nothin' to cut," Odett said with finality.

Madero studied the adamant lawman for a moment.

"Mebbe yuh ain't the apple I think yuh are, kid," he said at last. "In that case we'll fix somethin' up to cut."

Odett felt the blood rushing away from his face.

"No!" he cried hoarsely. "Not in this town, Madero! I'm trusted here. I'll—"

"What?" smirked the outlaw. "I'm jest as fast as I ever was with the irons, kid. Mebbe yuh'll tell 'em yuh've only been outa Sundance three years? Mebbe some of yore stage

stick-ups would be interestin' to hear about, or the cattle rustlin' over by the badlands? The town an' yore gal would like that. Confession's good for the soul."

Odett leaned back in his chair and licked his parched lips. He had been a fool to think he could escape the past. He had traveled far and concealed his trail well, but all of Montana was too small to keep the reckless things of a man's life from catching him. Former outlaw! Paroled from Sundance! Those things would sound pretty to a town whose citizens trusted him enough to elect him marshal. They would sound great to a girl who loved him for his honesty and righteousness. Confession—

Odett's eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Jest what yuh got in mind, Madero? The bank?"

"Now yuh're back in the saddle, kid," grinned the killer. "Yuh kin see all this ain't worth nothin' when there's easy money lyin' around."

Odett nodded.

"I jest saw that. It ain't worth it, Madero."

"Naw," echoed the outlaw. "We'll bust that tin can an' split three ways."

"Three ways?"

"My pard's camped at Bald Bear Peak. Pink Boysen. Jest a younker, but all right. We'll be in town about eleven o'clock. Have it figgered out, kid. An' if yuh slip—"

Odett nodded. "No slippin'," he said evenly. "I know yore gunplay, Madero, an' I'm not askin' for it. Everything will be planned right."

Madero rose ponderously.

"I'm tough on doublecrossers, kid," he said meaningly. Then he stomped from the office and swung into the saddle. He lifted his mount's head with a cruelly jerked rein and roared down the street.

Jim Odett settled back in his swivel chair and drew his hand wearily across his eyes.

When Odett looked up to the scrape of boots, Margo Thoms was standing before him. The bronze of her lovely face was deeper than it should be. The blue of her eyes had a steely polish and her upper lip held a faint curve of anger.

"That man knew you?" she charged sharply. "Spoke and acted like he'd known you for a long time. Is that why you didn't arrest him?"

Odett felt the sharp bite of anger. Margo was condemning him, just like everyone would condemn him if they knew his past. Margo wasn't stopping to ask the circumstances but was jumping at conclusions, just like everyone would.

"Yuh don't understand," he said defensively.

"I think I do," she said, and stepped to the dodger on the wall. "Madero Nuys rides into Corbin's law office and wants to talk to the marshal alone. Then he rides away. Jim—that's not hard to understand. There's something between you two. Tell me!"

"Yuh seem to have it all figured out," Odett answered bitterly.

MARGO stared for a moment, uncomprehendingly. She was seeing a different Jim Odett than she had ever known. There was the thinness of desperation in his lips, and angered bitterness in his amber-flecked eyes. She knew that by her condemnation she had touched upon secrets he held.

"Jim, I didn't mean—" she faltered. "I know you can't be partners."

He shook his head interruptingly.

"Yuh an' the whole town'll know," he murmured flatly. "I'll see to that. Yuh kin say yuh guessed right then—if it'll be any comfort!"

"Jim, you shouldn't feel—" she stammered, tears starting.

"I know what I'm in for," he went on evenly. "I was a fool to think I could dodge it. Things like this

always catch up with a man. But the chase ends here. The only thing that'll pursue me outa this town—will be my conscience. An' that'll be clear!"

A sob shook Margo, and she turned from the office. Her running boots beat against the boardwalk.

Jim Odett continued to stare through the dusty window pane. It didn't take much to wreck a life, he realized. A reckless escapade; hasty judgment; quick suspicion on the part of society. He ought to have thought of those things before he tried to run away from all this.

Abstractedly, he rose and removed his hat from the wall peg. He went to the street and let his eyes make their customary run up and down the strip of dust.

Corbin was a homey place. Two saloons, mercantile bank and smithy. Gnawed hitch-racks and moss-coated horse trough down near the corral. And the Silver Bow Mountains made a silvery scarped background. Yonder Bald Bear Peak, massive cone of rock that shot skyward. Jim Odett loved this country. It was such a firm anchor for a man's soul; it held such profound mysteries for a man's mind.

He turned up the boardwalk, tugging his hat brim tightly down on his forehead. There was purpose in the way he walked. Corbin had to know what kind of man he was. He turned into the saloon. Right now a drink would help.

CORBIN was held in the pale grip of star glow when Jim Odett angled down street toward the bank. It was eleven o'clock. He walked to the edge of town and then turned in the direction of the low call. He found Madero and his partner, Pink Boysen.

Odett was startled by Pink. He was but a mere boy, without the fuzzy telltale of coming beard on his bronze cheeks. There was a whipped attitude about him.

"Yore show, Jim," Madero said. "Pink here will side yuh. Jest to see there ain't no doublecross, I stay with the hosses. I'll be right here—waitin'. Pink kin open any box in the country."

"Better come, Madero," said Odett. "There's a box an' a vault to open. It'll take a long time."

"No trick, Odett," smirked Madero. "Go ahead, yuh two."

Odett sighed.

"Come on, kid," he said resignedly. He led the way to the alley and slipped into the darkness at the back door. He could feel Pink's uncertain trembling as he crowded close.

"Afraid?" queried the lawman softly.

"I'm with the law, ain't I?" The youngster's humor was lame.

"Shore," said Odett. Then he was fitting the key Silas Thoms had given him into the lock. Thoms had given him this key to use in defense of the bank—

Quietly, the two stepped inside and closed the door. Odett felt Pink's groping hand tremble again.

"Don't crack, kid," cautioned the marshal.

"I won't," shot back the youngster. "I jest can't help it—that's all."

Odett led the way to the safe. It was a small iron box standing near Thoms' desk. Pink blew on his fingers and went to his knees. This would be as easy as opening a door.

"How'd yuh git mixed up with Madero?" Odett asked as Pink worked.

"No folks," Pink said bitterly. "Driftin'. He picked me up an' fed me. Taught me, as a game, to spring combinations. Got me to open one in a saloon one night on a bet that I couldn't. It turned out to be a real job. He's had me hooked ever since."

"Holdin' yuh like he holds me," swore Odett.

Suddenly Pink straightened.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply.

A man was framed in the glass door out front. The fumbling rasp of a key came to them. Then the door was pushed open and a man came in. Odett and Pink crouched and waited as the man came straight for them. When he was almost upon them, the lawman rose and stabbed his gun in the man's belly.

"No sound!" Odett warned sharply. "Jest ease right around the chair. Pink! Find somethin' to tie him up!"

The man sat down with a thump under the threat of the gun. "Jim!" he exclaimed. "Jim Odett, robbing me! Robbin' the man who got yuh the marshal's job!"

"Shut up, Silas!" Odett snapped.

Pink returned from his tour of the bank. "Can't find nothin' to tie 'im with," he reported. It was patent that he was fearful of being away from the lawman.

Odett debated for a moment, then said: "Hold him, kid. I'm goin' for Madero. We'll fetch a rope an' anchor Thoms down. Madero can sweat the vault combination outa the buzzard. That's where the big money's kept."

Silas Thoms shook a trembling finger at the lawman.

"Odett," he swore fervently, "I'll git yuh for this if it's the last thing I do."

"Shut up!" warned Pink. "Or it might be the last thing right now!"

Quietly, Odett moved out the back door. He slipped down the alley and toward the trees. Before he reached them, Madero's surly voice cracked out.

"Who is it?" hissed the outlaw. Odett stopped.

"Come on, Madero," Odett called. "Silas Thoms walked in on us. We'll sweat the big money outa him."

Fetching a rope and palming his weapon, Madero followed Odett back to the bank. They found a fear-paled youngster and an irate bank owner.

Silas Thoms swore luridly as Madero bound him securely to the chair. The banker kept up his threats against Jim Odett.

"Shut up, Thoms!" Madero roared. "See the barrel of this gun? It won't chip like yore agate head. I count three an' bring it down on yore noggin unless yuh tell the kid here the vault numbers."

"Yuh kin go to hell!" swore the banker. "Jim Odett, I'll crack yuh—"

Madero's count was almost to three when Thoms broke.

"All right! All right!" he said weakly. "Turn me loose an' I'll open it for yuh personally. Yuh got me beat."

MADERO slashed the ropes. "Figgered yuh'd see it that way."

Every fiber of Odett's body was alert now. Here was the big haul he had figured on since being visited by Madero Nuys this afternoon. Corbin could believe what it wished when this was over.

Silas Thoms twirled the vault knob to the right and left. Then he was stepping back.

"She's open!" he said hoarsely. "Help yourselves."

Running his tongue over thick lips, Madero stepped to the vault door. With a jerk of his body, he flung the portal open. Then a curse was choking from his throat and the hammer of his gun was earing back.

But he never fired. He smashed back and the bank was filling with the roar of guns.

Madero spun sideward and his florid face was fixed with shocked surprise. He tried to curse Jim Odett, but his lips hung slack and he pitched to the floor.

Jim Odett tried to stop the lunging drive of Pink Boysen, but missed him. Again those hidden

guns spoke and the youngster wilted down.

Two bank clerks came slowly from the vault, their pistols still smoking. Their faces were flushed from the bad air they had been breathing.

"Another half hour an' we woulda been dead from the air," one of them said.

Odett sank to his knees beside the youngster.

"I didn't mean this for yuh, kid," he said quietly, a catch in his voice. "I woulda seen to it that yuh made off easy."

Silas Thoms was there beside Odett. Pink looked up at them.

"Better this way out, Odett," the youth said softly. "I was beginnin' to like the game. Gettin' off easy would have only allowed me to go on. There wasn't any way for me to beat all this. I didn't have the courage. You have, Odett. Yuh showed it by tellin' Thoms here who and what you were. If it'll ease the Madero killin', I want yuh to know that he intended to kill yuh when we got away. I'll see his soul in hell!" Then the kid died.

Slowly, the banker and the marshal rose from beside Boysen. People were pounding at the bank's door and the clerks were keeping them out. Thoms gripped Odett's arm.

"I gave the orders to shoot quickly, Jim," he said. "My daughter's happiness figured into this. Madero wouldn't have stood for arrestin'. He'd have squawked anyhow. Better he can't talk. Too many different kinds of people make up a town. I want yuh should go on bein' trusted here—without anything in people's minds to bother 'em. Yuh'll never regret tellin' me yore secret. It stays with me."

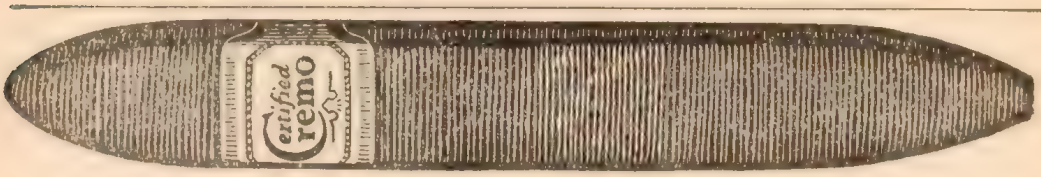
"I'll try to be deservin'," Odett said simply, a new light shining in his eyes.

"Yuh better try straightenin' out what happened between yuh and Margo this afternoon," said the banker. "I'm lookin' forward to a weddin' tomorrow. Slip out the back. I'll take care of things and spin the yarn to the town."

With shoulders squared, Jim Odett turned to the back door. The shadow was gone from the back trail and he had learned that being truthful was the only way to keep the reckless things of a man's life from catching him. He knew that to be trusted was to be trustful.

●

Next Month: HARD TO KILL, *a Novelet of Rustler Guns by* TOM GUNN—*and Many Other Stories*



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Would like to swap, Hawaiian sheet music. All letters answered. J. A. McCance, 611 East Broadway, Toledo, Ohio.

Stamps, periodicals, boys' books, match covers and coupons to trade for mint stamps of any country. Edward Dieterle, 29 Bentley Ave., Jersey City, N. J.

Will swap my shoe ice skate, size eleven and official boy scout uniform size fourteen for 16mm motor-driven movie projector. Please send model number and make of machine. Harry Clark, 499-49th Ave., Brooklyn, New York.

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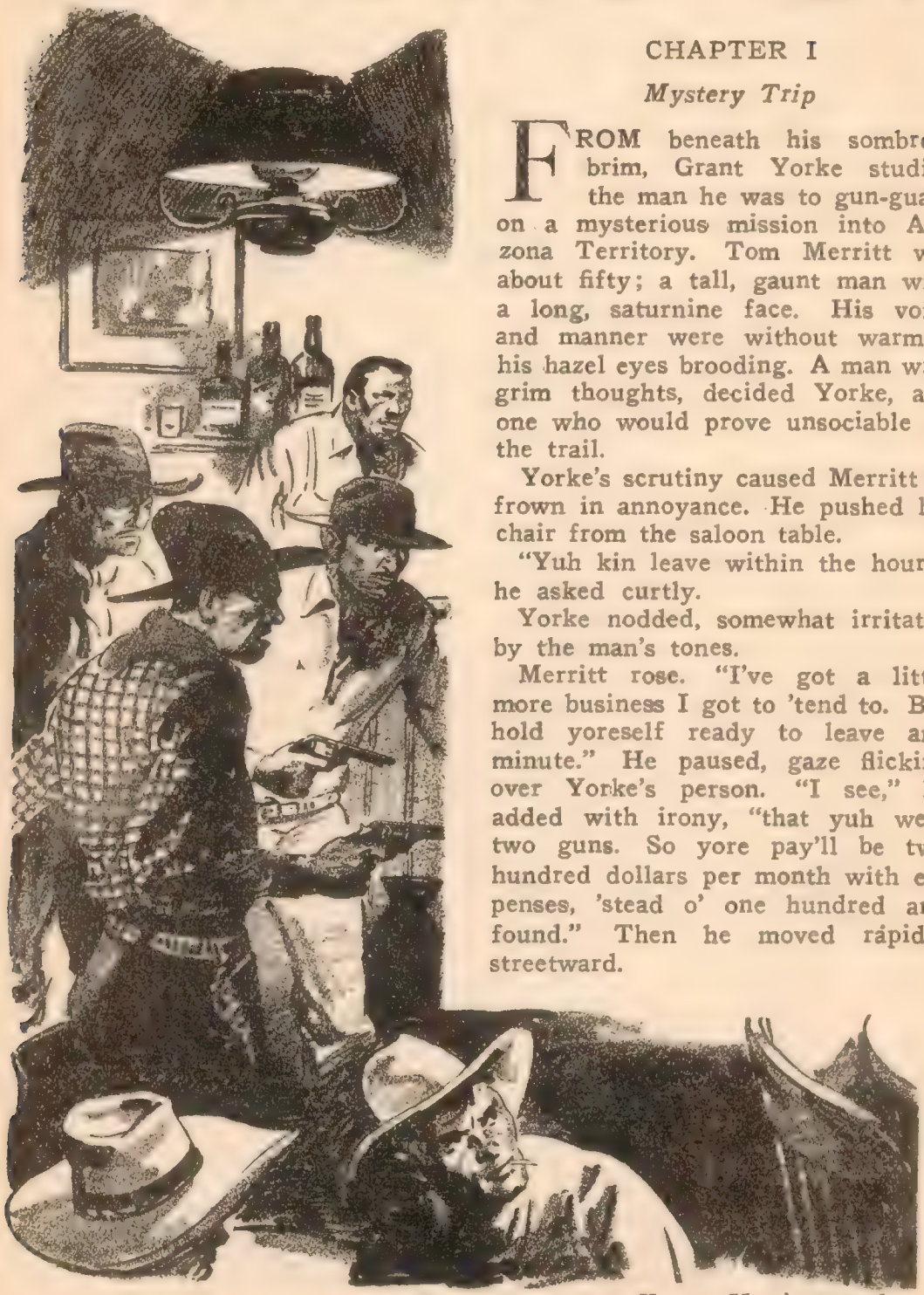


He saw Merritt sprawl

Guns Unleashed for Vengeance, Grant

CHAPTER I

Mystery Trip

FROM beneath his sombrero brim, Grant Yorke studied the man he was to gun-guard on a mysterious mission into Arizona Territory. Tom Merritt was about fifty; a tall, gaunt man with a long, saturnine face. His voice and manner were without warmth, his hazel eyes brooding. A man with grim thoughts, decided Yorke, and one who would prove unsociable on the trail.

Yorke's scrutiny caused Merritt to frown in annoyance. He pushed his chair from the saloon table.

"Yuh kin leave within the hour?" he asked curtly.

Yorke nodded, somewhat irritated by the man's tones.

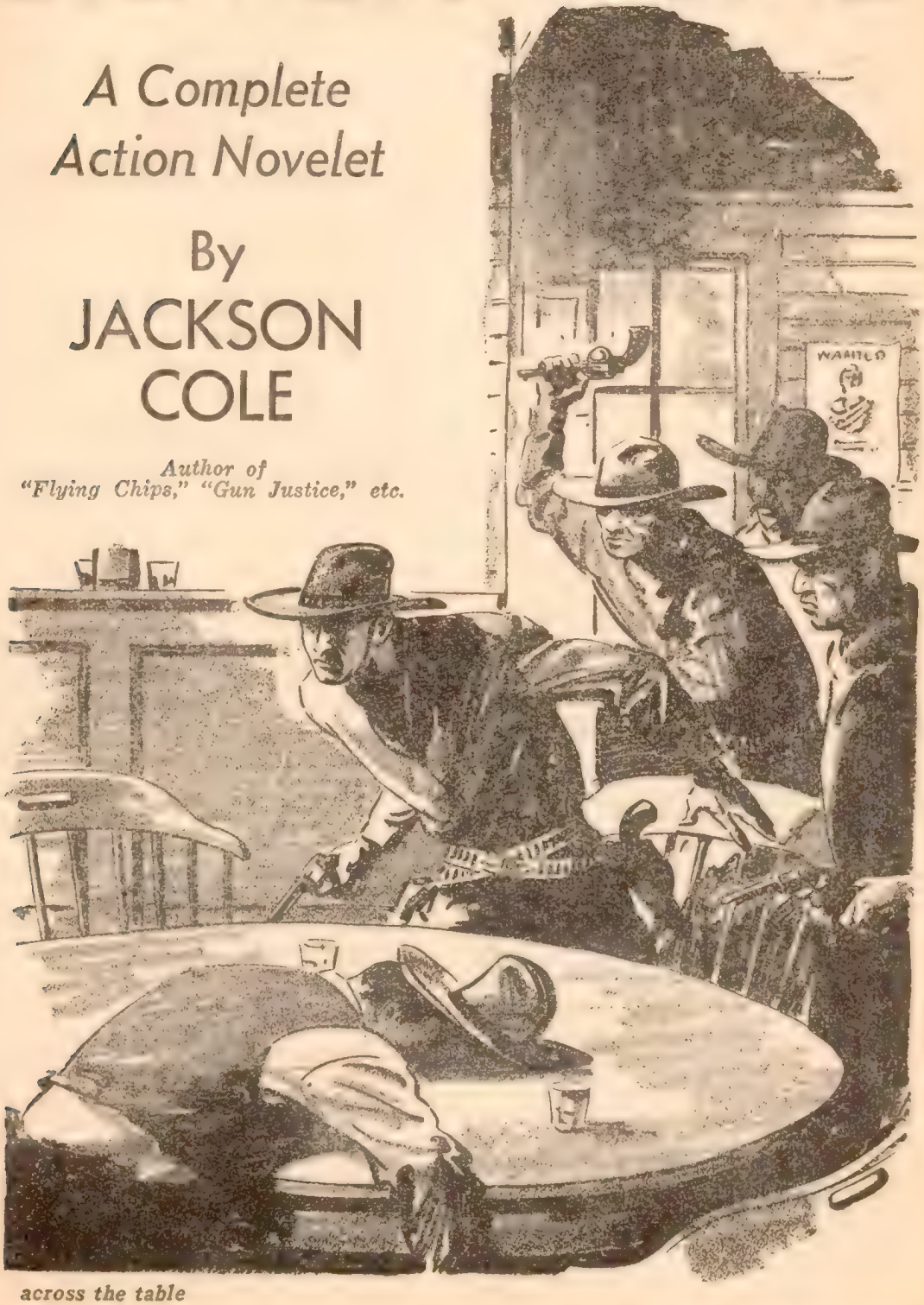
Merritt rose. "I've got a little more business I got to 'tend to. But hold yoreself ready to leave any minute." He paused, gaze flicking over Yorke's person. "I see," he added with irony, "that yuh wear two guns. So yore pay'll be two hundred dollars per month with expenses, 'stead o' one hundred and found." Then he moved rápidly streetward.

SILVER BEND

A Complete Action Novelet

By
JACKSON COLE

Author of "Flying Chips," "Gun Justice," etc.



across the table

Yorke Invades a Coyote-Ruled Ranch!

Yorke's slate-grey eyes held an angry question as he looked at Mal Lafferty, middle-aged former Border gun-fighter and owner of the Red Dog Saloon.

"Take it easy, Grant," Lafferty said soothingly. "Merritt's always plumb sharp-tongued and 'bout as sociable as a coyote. But he's right respected here in Yantes. Prosperous, too. Owns the Yantes general store and the Longhorn Ranchers bank. Me, I've always found him a mighty square shooter."

Yorke's smile was wintry. "Square-shootin'—mebbe. But no man kin pay me enough to ride me. Nor to do what he says, doglike."

Lafferty frowned. "Yuh're too damned skittish to hire out as any man's guard. Yuh better tell Merritt for him to git somebody else for his job."

YORKE shook his head. "I'm not aimin' to back out. I don't know why this Merritt hombre is headin' for Arizona, but I'm plumb curious. Enough to be willin' to risk havin' to teach him manners along the way."

Lafferty sighed resignedly and began inquiring as to conditions in Chihuahua. Yorke had just ridden up from there. They were deep in discussion of a current Mexican political intrigue when Tom Merritt returned, outfitted in range dress but apparently unarmed.

Five minutes later found Yorke astride his wiry palomino. Merritt, superbly mounted on a mettlesome black gelding, set an easy gait toward the nearby New Mexico-Arizona Border. No word passed between them until they had cleared the town. Then Yorke said:

"You armed?"

Merritt gazed straight ahead. "No," he snapped. "I've never toted a gun and don't see no reason to start now. If there's any call for shootin', that's where you come in." And he lapsed again into a moody silence.

Yorke curbed a rising impatience with the man. How Merritt had ever become a successful banker and proprietor of a general store he could not understand. Surely that acid tongue of his and his surly manner had been no help to him in getting and holding customers.

What nettled Yorke most was the man's secretiveness regarding his mission. It wasn't until several days later, when they had left Tucson, Arizona, behind them that Merritt grudgingly disclosed that the mining and cowtown of Silver Bend was their destination.

Slight though this information was, Yorke found it enlightening to an extent. He knew Silver Bend. He had visited there briefly a year previous. The town was reputedly the toughest community in Arizona Territory, the headquarters of a band of rustlers, bandits, and gunmen who were under the dominance of one Les Dakin.

Dakin, a saloon and gambling hall proprietor, was also the owner of the Lazy Y, largest spread on the Silver Bend range. If Merritt was bent on seeking trouble in Silver Bend, Yorke could easily understand why he had wanted a companion who could shoot fast and straight at the drop of a hat.

Silver Bend was forty miles southwest of Tucson. They had covered thirty of these when Merritt suddenly called Yorke's attention to a cow grazing near the trail.

"My eyes ain't so good, Yorke," he suggested. "Kin yuh make out the brand on that heifer?"

"Shore. It's the Lazy Y. Biggest spread around here. Owned by a hombre named Les Dakin."

Merritt's face went grim as Yorke eyed him sharply.

"Know this Les Dakin?" Yorke

drawled, but Merritt acted as though he hadn't heard.

Both men were silent until the trail had swept to their left and around a high knoll, beyond which a rambling old 'dobe ranchhouse came into view.

"The Lazy Y home spread," said Yorke, covertly watching Merritt's face.

But Merritt's features were expressionless. He gazed at the ranchhouse with no apparent interest. Presently, however, Grant Yorke thought he detected a strangely eager gleam in the man's hazel eyes. Wondering, he followed Merritt's gaze with his own.

A girl had appeared on the ranchhouse veranda. At their approach she left the veranda and came trailward, a Scotch collie cavorting at her heels.

Both riders halted their mounts opposite the girl. She smiled a greeting. Yorke's eyes twinkled with appreciation, merely looking at her. She was a pretty brunette, her petite figure lithesome and firmly rounded.

Her wide brown eyes were engagingly frank.

"Howdy, Miss," Yorke said easily. "Grant Yorke is my handle, and my pardner's is 'Tom Merritt. We're from New Mexico way and headin' for Silver Bend."

"And happy we've come your way, Miss," said Merritt with a geniality that surprised Grant Yorke.

"Pleased to meet you both," said the girl simply. "My name is Myrna Dakin. This is my Father's spread, the Lazy Y." She paused, then added hospitably: "If you're not hurried, we'll be glad to ease your trail-fag. Ah Wong can fix up a snack in a jiffy."

Yorke was about to accept with alacrity, when Merritt said:

"Thank yuh, Miss Dakin, but we've got to git to Silver Bend by dusk. That means we've got to high-tail it some." His glance indicated the sun, now vanishing behind jagged crests of the Comobabis.

Yorke was exasperated. The ride from Tucson had been leisurely and this sudden call for haste was strange. But he said nothing.

In the circumstances he could hardly refute the words of his companion.

The next moment they rode onward, Yorke with a pronounced feeling of reluctance he could not quite fathom.

"Why all this sudden rush?" he asked coldly, after they had jogged on a distance.

Merritt's saturnine face was hard. "I've got reasons a-plenty for not wantin' to linger none around that ranchhouse," he said grimly.

"Yeah? What might they be?"

"They might be none of your damn business," was the cutting retort.

GRANT YORKE fought back hot words. Merritt was right, he told himself bitterly. He should not even have asked Merritt that—or asked any man. He had no business prying into the affairs of his companion—his employer. His job was to protect Merritt from bodily harm, and that only. But it was getting harder all the time to keep a curb bit on his tongue.

They rode on in silence, Merritt apparently lost in gloomy thought, and Yorke wondering darkly about his secretive companion. What was Merritt's reason for not wanting to linger about the Lazy Y ranchhouse? What was the reason for this loco trip, anyhow? And what had caused eagerness to brighten Merritt's eyes at sight of Les Dakin's daughter, Myrna?

Yorke had found no answers to these questions when they rode into Silver Bend shortly after dusk. They

quartered their horses in Tompkins' livery and engaged rooms at the Palace Hotel. Following a hearty meal in a fly-infested beanery near the hotel, they moseyed into the Juanita combination saloon and gambling hall.

A tall, burly man with an almost Indianlike cast of features stood at the near end of the long bar, watching their entrance. The man's gaze, casual at first, suddenly became intent on Merritt. Yorke saw recognition glitter in the man's black eyes. But the next instant the man averted his face, leaving Yorke puzzled. But he was certain that he had seen fear mirrored upon that swarthy face.

APPROACHING the bar center, Yorke glanced back. The man at the bar head was gone, apparently having left in a hurry.

Grant Yorke's puzzlement deepened.

"Who's that hombre that looks like a breed?" he asked the bartender casually. "The one that jest left the place like he was on the prod?"

The bartender scowled. "He's no breed, pilgrim," he snapped. "And yuh better button yore lip on talk like that in this place, or in this town. Les Dakin owns this place. What's more, what he says goes in Silver Bend. Every way from the ace. Savvy?"

Merritt, pouring himself a whiskey, glanced up quickly. "Les Dakin? Where?"

"Hightailed it outa here a minute ago," said Yorke, grinning maliciously at the scowling bartender. "Musta seen somebody he didn't like. Know him, Merritt?"

Merritt laughed softly, mirthlessly, but said nothing. He turned from the bar and drifted down the room to an empty table and seated himself.

Yorke followed thoughtfully. He was sure Merritt and Les Dakin knew each other. And he was equally as positive that Dakin didn't care overmuch about meeting the taciturn Merritt.

Fifteen minutes of silence at the table with Merritt, and Grant Yorke's curiosity got out of hand.

"Mebbe it's none of my business," he began, "but—"

"Yuh're damn tootin'," curtly interrupted Merritt. "It ain't none o' yore business."

A certain contempt behind the words stung Yorke into rapid, hot anger.

"You ain't talkin' to no cur dog, feller!" he shot through clenched teeth. "You been kinda forgettin' that."

"Nope," was the withering retort. "I reckon not. But they's some other kind o' animals yuh been resemblin' some when it comes to curiosity. I've heard 'em called monkeys."

Yorke rose from his chair, hands clenched and slate-grey eyes blazing wrath. The next instant his hands unballed.

Seemingly out of nowhere the two had drawn an audience. At least a dozen saloon patrons were encircling them. And suddenly Grant Yorke's eyes caught the glint of a six-gun being whipped from a holster just beyond Merritt.

Cursing himself for a fool, Yorke's hands dropped to the ivory handles of the Colt .44s holstered low against his thighs. Simultaneously a six-gun roared behind Merritt. And at the exact instant that Yorke's hands started up with his guns, a hammerlike blow crashed at the base of his skull.

The room spun crazily. Hazily, he saw Merritt sprawl across the table. Another blow on the back of his head buckled Yorke's legs. Someone jerked his Colts from his hands. Then oblivion blanketed him.

CHAPTER II

Necktie Party

RETURN of consciousness was an ordeal. Grant Yorke's head was one throbbing ache. He struggled to a sitting position and peered searchingly into the gloom about him. Between him and a hard-packed earthen floor was a filthy burlap-ticked straw mattress. Head high in a 'dobe wall to his right was a small barred window showing a bit of star-strewn sky.

Yorke grinned wryly. He was in a cell in the town calaboose.

But his grin faded as events preceding his lapse from consciousness flashed vividly across his mind. He had failed Tom Merritt in a vital moment of need. He had let a man, an unarmed man who had depended on him for protection in just such circumstances, be murdered in cold blood before his eyes. And all because of a few seconds of hot, blinding anger. Memory of Merritt's violent passing would haunt him always—a grim reminder that he had failed miserably in the rôle of gun-guardian.

Yorke turned and stared moodily at the cell door. Beyond it was a lighted room where a middle-aged man sat at a battered roll-top desk. Yorke had seen him before on his previous visit to the town, and recognized him as Zeke Price, Silver Bend's honest but none-too-efficient town marshal.

Yorke rose, moved to the cell door and hailed the man. The marshal swung about in his swivel chair, his round florid face wearing a worried frown.

"Come out of it, eh?" the lawman remarked.

"How come I'm here?" said Yorke curtly.

"Yuh're charged with murder," was the succinct reply.

"Huh! Murder? Who'd anybody say I murdered?"

"A hombre named Tom Merritt," the marshal informed blandly, "durin' an argument in the Juanita saloon. A cold-blooded job, that—shootin' an unarmed man in the back."

Yorke swore silently. This was retribution with a vengeance. His foolish flare-up not only had cost Merritt his life but now threatened to cost another—his own.

"I didn't shoot Merritt," said Yorke flatly. "A look at my guns'll prove that. Besides, he was a saddle pard o' mine."

"Wrong," retorted Price evenly. "One of yore guns has an exploded shell in its chamber. Fits all right."

Oddly, Yorke had half anticipated the marshal's reply. He recalled now that his pair of Colts had been jerked from his hands after he had been slugged in the saloon.

"I suppose there's a flock of witnesses to swear I fired the shot that killed Merritt, huh?" he remarked sardonically.

"Nine, to be plumb exact," said the marshal, with a noncommittal shrug.

"Including a sidewinder named Les Dakin?"

Marshal Price nodded, his worried frown deepening, and cocked his head in a listening attitude. Yorke, listening also, heard an ominous murmuring seeping through the calaboose door. A vague disquiet seized him.

"Well?" he said. "Somebody out there?"

"Friends of yore'n," said Price gravely, and reached for a double-barreled shotgun leaning against his desk. "But I'm aimin' to see they don't git the privilege of meetin' yuh."

Yorke's head spun as this thought

accelerated. He knew the answer to those sounds all right. A mob was forming outside the jail. And well he knew the grim swiftness of cow-town justice, too.

"So I'm wanted for a necktie party?" he said tightly, watching Price who now stood listening intently in front of the heavy oaken calaboose door. "Well, yuh kin save yoreself a lot of grief by turnin' me over to 'em, lawman, or else give me a gun. You don't stand no chance a-tall if yuh try standin' them off by yoreself."

Price turned and moved to Yorke's cell. "I ain't aimin' to give yuh no gun—'less it's the last resort," he said, his florid face showing dogged determination. "Les Dakin's been achin' to see yuh strung up ever since he nearly brained yuh with a six-gun after yuh shot Merritt. But I got yuh outa the saloon and to here. And I'm goin' to see yuh safe into the custody of Sheriff Ike Brannigan at Tucson, or else—" The marshal didn't finish, but his manner was grimly significant.

"Why is Les Dakin so durned anxious to see me strung up?" Yorke demanded.

"He says Merritt was an old friend of his," explained Price. "He 'pears to be takin' the killin' plumb hard."

Yorke snorted disgustedly. "Why, the dirty—" He abruptly paused. Price had turned and was approaching the calaboose door.

Yorke watched the marshal but his thoughts were elsewhere. He had been framed by Les Dakin. That was plain enough now. And Dakin wanted him out of the way permanently. Why? Solely to complete the frame for Merritt's killing? Hardly, thought Yorke, and made a shrewd guess. He decided that Dakin thought he, Yorke, knew Merritt's purpose in coming to Silver Bend—a purpose that probably was highly dangerous to Dakin.

Yorke's tall, slim form tautened. Price was unbarring the massive oaken door.

"I'm goin' to try talkin' 'em into reason," he called reassuringly over his shoulder. "If they go away, we'll hightail for Tucson. If they're too stubborn—well, I reckon we'll see what we'll see."

As the marshal edged the door open, Yorke glanced sharply ceilingward. Dull, scraping sounds came from that direction. The marshal, shotgun ready, eased himself out of the partly opened door. Yorke shouted a warning that went unheard.

The next instant pandemonium reigned outside the calaboose. Yorke sensed what had happened. Someone had clambered to the calaboose roof, awaited the marshal's exit, then had dropped upon the unsuspecting lawman, flooring him.

YORKE'S guess proved correct. The door was flung wide—and there was no sign of the marshal.

Yorke watched the angry crowd surge into the calaboose. His face was grimly set, his slate-grey eyes scornful. The door of his cell was quickly unlocked with the keys wrested from the overpowered marshal. He stalked from the cell alert for a chance to seize one of the Colts leveled at him. But he had taken only a couple of steps when strong arms encircled him from behind. Despite his struggling a gag was roughly forced between his teeth and his hands trussed firmly behind him.

His captors promptly hustled him from the calaboose. Outside, he was hoisted astride a pinto cow pony. A score of his captors swung into saddles and herded him out of town, westward.

Les Dakin was leading the small cavalcade. Bitterness seared Yorke's heart as he stared at the man whom

he knew had framed him. Dakin, a yellow-livered drygulcher, was to be his Nemesis. A greaser's knife would suit Les Dakin far better than presiding over a hang rope. And the other riders — Dakin's men undoubtedly. Yorke knew the type. Hard-faced paid killers to whom fair gun-fighting was unknown and cold-blooded murder all in a day's work.

Yorke wondered which of the motley band had shot down Merritt. Not Les Dakin, for Dakin had been the man who clubbed him from behind when the shot that killed Merritt had been fired. Dakin could have lied to Marshal Price, of course, but Yorke thought not. Men of Dakin's stripe invariably had their killings done for them.

WITH the town's outskirts behind them, Yorke strained against the cord binding his wrists. His heart thumped wildly as the strands apparently gave. Hope looming, he worked feverishly. But the next moment the cavalcade veered abruptly from the trail and headed into a clump of cottonwoods.

A lariat noose settled over his head. Someone led the pinto under a cottonwood. As the loose end of the lariat was flung over a stout cottonwood branch, Yorke desperately exerted every ounce of effort to free his hands. But though the cord cut deeply into his wrists, it held.

A rider edged close on his left. Les Dakin, his swart face grinning evilly, sneered.

"Too bad yuh can't say nothin' before yuh go," he taunted. "I'd shore admire to hear yuh beg for mercy, but I've kinda got some reasons for wantin' yuh gagged till yuh stretch. So if they's anything yuh do want to blabber about—yell it up out of hell!"

Punctuating his last remark with a foul oath Dakin landed a backhanded blow that caught the cowboy flush on his gagged mouth, bringing blood.

Insane rage welled in Grant Yorke's breast. He wrenched at his bonds. And suddenly—and surprisingly—the cord parted! His hands were free! In a movement swift as light, urged by his own desperate situation, he had snatched Dakin's six-gun from its holster. In the same blur of movement he dug a spur into the flank of Dakin's horse. The animal screamed and reared wildly.

Confusion reigned then. At the unexpectedness of what was happening the necktie party was held momentarily speechless, motionless. And in that moment Yorke spurred the pinto forward, crouching low in saddle. Curses and wild yells sounded on every hand but not a gun barked. In the darkness and general mêlée Dakin and his men apparently hesitated to use their weapons for fear of hitting one of their own number. He was fifty yards away before the first bullet whistled past him.

Grinning grimly and mirthlessly, Yorke urged the pinto into a dead run. The cover of night was his able ally, for ten minutes later pursuit sounds began to wane. Another ten minutes and they died completely.

Shortly Yorke reined the pinto to a lope and abruptly altered his course from south to east. He rode warily, for his objective was Silver Bend. Again he grinned mirthlessly at the thought. Out of the frying pan into the fire. Well, maybe.

Forty minutes later Silver Bend loomed ahead. Its main street was deserted. Yorke rode boldly to Tompkins' livery, halted and dismounted. Exactly three minutes later he had saddled his own horse. Much to Yorke's annoyance, the palomino whinnied softly and frequently in prolonged greeting as he led the animal to the calaboose.

The calaboose was dark, its door standing open. Cautiously, Yorke slipped inside and to the marshal's desk. He found his pair of six-guns in a drawer. He left the six-gun he had snatched from Dakin in their place and departed, chuckling softly as he pictured the marshal's perplexity when he discovered the switch of guns.

Grant Yorke was beginning to feel his old self again as he swung into saddle. The pair of Colt .44s leather-snug against his thighs were priceless possessions to him. So, too, the palomino. He had felt lost without them. And they would shortly re-

pay him a hundred-fold for his trouble in regaining them if Fate proved kind.

Leaving Silver Bend, Yorke rode east. His destination was the Lazy Y ranchhouse. He was determined to beard the boss of Silver Bend in his own den. And in his heart was the further grim determination that Les Dakin must pay for the brutal killing of Tom Merritt.

It was midnight when he neared the Lazy Y ranchhouse, and both ranchhouse and bunkhouse were dark. Ground-hitching the palomino off-trail, he cautiously approached the ranchhouse. He didn't expect to find Les Dakin home. Not yet. But when the Lazy Y owner did return—

The veranda was gloom-shrouded and seemingly unoccupied as he swung himself quietly over the railing at one end. The next instant he froze into immobility. A voice, low and girlish, came from the deep shadows near the front door.

"Good evening, Mr. Yorke."

CHAPTER III

Ministering Angel

THE voice was Myrna Dakin's. Her presence startled Yorke out of any composure that might still have remained to him after his recent harrowing experience.

"Nice evenin'," he said lamely.

Myrna slowly approached him. Yorke doffed his sombrero and fingered its brim nervously. His embarrassment at being caught like a common thief in the night grew with every passing second.

Myrna broke the painful silence. "Ah Wong," she said softly, "returned from town an hour ago. He told me of your—your trouble."

Yorke found himself at loss for words, and cursed himself for a tongue-tied fool.

"Did you—as they say you did—kill your friend, Mr. Merritt?" Myrna asked. There was a curious, half pleading note in her voice that hinted that a denial would please her. Yorke wished mightily that he could see her face plainly. Even a hint of sympathy would be welcome to him now.

"I didn't shoot Merritt," he said simply, and earnestly.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said Myrna, her relief plain. "I couldn't believe—I mean, I didn't think that you'd commit cold-blooded murder. You—you didn't look like a man of that sort when I saw you today."

Yorke experienced a strange, exhilarating feeling. It heightened as the girl stepped confidently close to him, apparently not being afraid of him as a branded murderer.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked anxiously. "They are looking for you, aren't they?"

Grant Yorke nodded. But he could

not tell her what course he meant to pursue now. He did not know. He had come to the Lazy Y to kill Les Dakin. Killing Dakin was still his purpose, but he was conscious of a fast-growing reluctance to meet Dakin here. He could hardly kill the man in his daughter's presence. There should be—there simply had to be—some other way.

A startled gasp from Myrna startled him. Her hand had brushed one of his and she felt the warm stickiness of blood. At her insistence he revealed its source—his badly lacerated wrists.

"Come inside," she commanded. "I'll have those wrists of yours fixed up in a jiffy."

Ignoring his protests, she made him enter the ranchhouse. Inside, she lighted a kerosene lamp in the living room and vanished kitchenward. Yorke lounged about the room, well furnished, with an eye to comfort. Myrna's work, of course, decided Yorke. Sure was rotten that a scoundrel like Les Dakin should be blessed with a daughter like her.

In his browsing he came upon a highly polished mahogany stand. A large book, its worn brown leather cover unmarked, lay on the stand. Prompted by idle curiosity, he opened the book. He was about to close it when a name on a fly-leaf caught his eye. He frowned thoughtfully. The name was:

LUCY TARBELL MERRITT

Swift, light footsteps heralded Myrna's return. Grant Yorke hastily closed the book as Myrna entered with a pan of hot water, peroxide and bandages. Ten minutes later, Yorke's lacerated wrists were expertly treated and bandaged.

"Thank yuh, Miss Dakin," he said simply.

"Myrna, if you please," she said, smiling. "You wouldn't want to make me feel prim and old-maidish at nineteen, would you?" Twin imps danced in her large brown eyes.

Yorke grinned. "A beautiful name," he said gallantly. "But as *dinero* begets *dinero*, so does beauty beget beauty."

Myrna laughed softly and glanced at the kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling center.

"Very nicely said, but that isn't the moon, Mr. Yorke."

"Jest plain Grant," chuckled Yorke. "Please."

Still laughing, Myrna nodded and disappeared kitchenward with the evidence of surgical treatment.

Yorke watched her go, thoughtfully. There was no longer any reason for him to linger about the Lazy Y ranchhouse. He would have to settle matters with Les Dakin elsewhere. It didn't matter where, only that it be some place beyond the vision of one pair of lovely brown eyes. And even that original idea of his was wavering, with the idea of grief coming to those eyes. Was it possible that Les Dakin would have to escape, simply because of this daughter of his? But that *must* not be! By all the laws of this West of his he owed it to Merritt to avenge his death.

MYRNA'- face was serious when she returned to the living room.

"For the second time," she repeated anxiously, "what are you going to do now? You can't stay here, of course, or go to Silver Bend. And by morning there'll be a hundred men searching the range for you."

He smiled reassuringly. "I'll take good care of myself."

But Myrna was not satisfied. She extinguished the kerosene lamp and returned to the veranda, Yorke following. In the southwest, a full moon shone above the Comobabis. The night was cool and breeze-laden. Only a lone cricket disturbed the quiet

"I've an idea," said Myrna presently, "that the high feeling against you must be given a chance to die down. When that happens you'll be able to prove your innocence of the killing. For I'm sure you are innocent, no matter what they say. I think you should find some place to hide for a time. I've such a place in mind."

"Where?" Yorke quickly said.

"Echo Canyon. It's hard by Santos Mesa, ten miles south of here. It's a small box canyon and one I believe no one hereabouts knows except myself. The entrance is very narrow and screened by underbrush."

"Sounds promising," said Yorke thoughtfully.

"Go there—please." Myrna suddenly inclined her head, listening. "Someone is coming along the trail," she whispered quickly. "I'm certain it's Father, and he's so stubborn and hard to argue with. You'd better go quickly."

Yorke sensed rather than saw the worriment mirrored on Myrna's face. The drumming of approaching hoofs was plainer now. He throttled an impulse to hold his ground and have it out with Les Dakin, but Myrna's presence ruled out such a course.

He murmured a farewell and stepped from the veranda.

"I'll be at the canyon with food in the morning," Myrna called softly after him, when she had given him hurried and explicit directions how to find the place. "Good night and good luck."

In spite of the fact that he was a hunted man, one over whose head hung the serious charge of murder, Yorke's heart was as light as his step as he headed for the palomino. He vaulted into saddle and watched with sardonic eyes as a horseman rode into the yard and dismounted. The rider was Les Dakin.

Waiting until Dakin had disappeared into the ranchhouse, Yorke rode south at a lope. Two hours later the palomino was hobbled and grazing within the small confines of Echo Canyon. Near the horse, Grant Yorke slumbered, wrapped in a saddle blanket and with his head pillowed on his saddle—

THE sun was high when Yorke awoke. Sleep was still in his eyes when the thudding of hoofs brought him erect. He moved warily to the brush-choked canyon entrance, six-guns ready in hands. Then he smiled.

The rider was Myrna Dakin. She dismounted and snaked her horse through brush afoot.

"Mornin'," said Yorke, grinning broadly.

But his grin faded as the girl ignored his greeting. Her face was coldly impassive and her gaze studiously avoided his. She handed him a small package.

"The food I promised," she said curtly, and turned to leave.

Puzzled, and irritated, too, Yorke moved swiftly and barred her way.

"What's wrong?" he insisted. "What have I done? Why, I thought last night—"

Brown eyes met his grey ones squarely and flashed anger.

"Last night," she said bitterly, "I thought you spoke the truth when you said you didn't shoot your partner. This morning I know you as a liar. Now, please let me go. You have your food as I promised. We're quits."

Yorke was pale. "Who told you I lied about the shooting?" he said, his voice harsh despite himself.

"My Father."

Yorke stared blankly, then suddenly laughed. His laugh was bitterly derisive. Myrna flushed angrily for she could not know that his laughter was directed at himself.

She tried desperately to shove him

from her path. He resisted her efforts momentarily and ceased his laughing. Then, abruptly, he stepped aside. He had intended to attempt an explanation of her father's fastening the killing of Merritt on him. But now he saw it would be useless. Myrna had already weighed her father's word against his—and had found his wanting.

But as the girl vanished through the canyon mouth he wished he had attempted to explain. For even in his desperate situation, a most illuminating realization had come to him, one that was startling, and numbing, too. He loved this lovely slip of a girl with wide, trusting brown eyes! The ironical situation was enough to drive a man to sardonic laughter. And to tears, too, if he could have found any.

Yorke moved to the canyon entrance. He wanted to see Myrna once again. Probably, he thought bitterly, for the last time.

She was a hundred yards distant, riding the narrow rocky trail winding along the base of Santos Mesa. As he watched a horseman suddenly appeared around a bend in the trail ahead of Myrna. At sight of the rider the girl reined her horse to a sliding halt, spun about and started back toward the canyon. But her pursuer quickly caught up with her, flung an arm about her waist and swept her from saddle.

Yorke was turning to run for his own horse when he saw the horseman drop the girl unceremoniously to the trail and ride boldly toward the canyon. Ten yards from the canyon entrance the rider halted and dismounted. He continued his approach afoot, six-gun ready in hand.

Yorke wondered at the man's boldness until he reflected that the stalker probably had sufficient reason to believe his quarry badly wounded. Undoubtedly the man had followed Myrna from the ranchhouse and, noting that she carried food, thought it improbable that she would go to that trouble for an able-bodied fugitive, even though he might not guess who that fugitive was.

Yorke retreated into the canyon. There he unlimbered his Colts and, scorning cover, awaited the appearance of his stalker.

A long moment passed, then from the heavy brush choking the canyon mouth stepped a burly red-headed man with a flat, pock-marked face. The fellow halted at sight of Yorke, scowling blackly. His six-gun leveled. Three guns roared as one. But Yorke's two Colts were a split second the quicker. The burly redhead's bullet ricocheted harmlessly off the canyon wall as its sender crumpled slowly to the ground.

Cautiously Yorke approached the still figure. Two crimson splotches on the man's shirt near the heart spoke for themselves. The killer's eyes were wide, filmed, and dark with pain. The end was obviously near.

"Yuh've got a chance to do one good turn 'fore yuh go, hombre," said Grant Yorke grimly. "Tell me who killed Tom Merritt."

THE man's lips twisted sardonically. "Yuh go ask Pedro Vellez," he whispered hoarsely. "I'll be waitin' in hell for yuh to tell what he said. *Sabe?*"

He leered horribly for a tense moment. Then he groaned and twisted convulsively. Presently he lay still, eyes glassy.

Yorke rose to find Myrna Dakin approaching from the canyon entrance. He nodded gravely in answer to the mute question in her brown eyes. Myrna frowned worriedly.

"He was one of Father's tophands," she said. "These killings— Oh, what will they all lead to!"

The despairing note in her voice

roused Yorke from his own somber thoughts. He laid a hand gently upon her arm.

"Worry won't help nothin'," he admonished. "And things ain't as bad as they look like. Jest keep yore chin up."

To his utter surprise Myrna swept his hand away and stared at him with unmistakable loathing.

"Killer!" she accused tightly. "You didn't give your partner a chance for his life—and more than likely you drygulched poor Red Drake. Take my advice—ride hard and fast." There was a scarcely disguised threat in her last words.

Yorke's face was granite-hard.

"I gave him an even break," he said thickly, and turned, strode to where the palomino grazed.

Unhobbling the horse, he led it out of the canyon without a backward look. Myrna Dakin watched his exit in silence, frowning perplexedly.

CHAPTER IV

Who Killed Tom Merritt?

YORKE rode aimlessly for several miles, a great bitterness in his heart. His thoughts frequently echoed the girl's wonderment in the canyon. How would it all end?

Presently he struck a southeast course, rudiments of a plan of action forming in his mind. Lodestone, a small mining settlement fifty miles southeast of Silver Bend, fitted into his rapidly forming scheme.

Twelve hours later he rode into Lodestone, saddle weary and hungry. After stabling the palomino in the local livery, he ate a hearty meal in a Mex beanery. Then he went to the town's lone hostelry, a ramshackle, two-story frame structure, registered and went upstairs to a small, ill-furnished room. Five minutes later he was sleeping the sleep of the exhausted.

At noon next day he rose. Shortly he drifted into the El Capitan, larger of the town's two saloons, intent on learning whether or not any news had seeped into the community from Silver Bend.

At the bar he struck up a conversation with a garrulous old desert rat who said his name was Alf Winters. The old prospector, he learned, had just returned from the Comobabis and had passed through Silver Bend by stage early yesterday. Yorke skilfully plied the old man with questions, posing as a cowboy looking for a berth on a decent spread.

"Well, if yuh're lookin' for work 'round Silver Bend," chuckled Alf Winters, "yuh might try droppin' in on Les Dakin's Lazy Y. It's a big spread, an' he lost a tophand a coupla days back. Somebody paid him off in lead. A good riddance, says I."

"How yuh mean—good riddance?" asked Yorke, ordering drinks.

"'Cause Red Drake was plumb no good," was the succinct retort.

"How was he killed?" Yorke inquired casually.

"Well, they claim he musta run into a hombre that shot down a man the night before in the Juanita saloon. They think Red run onto this hombre accidentally in a small canyon hard by Santos Mesa—an' got ventilated for his trouble. Les Dakin says Red Drake was drygulched, but that don't hitch with the fact that there was one bullet fired from the dead man's gun." The old prospector paused and glanced sharply at Yorke. "Say," he added, suspicion flickering in his eyes, "you look mighty like what they say this killer looks yoreself, hombre."

Yorke grinned. "Mebbe I am that *hombre malo,*" he said jocularly.

"And mebbe you're this high and mighty Les Dakin they talk 'bout."

The old prospector chuckled, suspicion fading from his eyes. But the next moment his face was grave.

"Mistakin' anybody, jokin' or not, for Les Dakin is an insult to most folks in this part of the country, cowboy," he said soberly.

Yorke feigned surprise. "Hated that bad, eh?"

"Worse. I've knowed plenty bad hombres in my days, but this Les Dakin takes the cake. Him and his gang of cutthroats has got to be cleaned out sooner or later if honest folks is gonna have a chance to breathe pure an' free air in these parts."

Yorke refilled the old prospector's glass, his sun-bronzed face thoughtful. He listened to the old fellow's ramblings a while longer, then parted with old Alf Winters, promising to look him up later.

Yorke returned to the hotel. He had suspected it before, and now he was certain of it—Les Dakin feared something in his past. And feared it mightily. Yorke was sure that the man's fear was responsible for the killing of Merritt and the framing of himself for the crime. And he knew well enough that Dakin wasn't resting easy nights. Dakin wouldn't rest easy, ever—not until he knew that Grant Yorke's lips were sealed in death. Yorke was certain on that score.

What Dakin feared Yorke did not know. But the name he had seen on the fly-leaf of the Bible in the living room of the Lazy Y ranchhouse had given him a faint glimmering of a lead. He decided to follow up the lead pronto.

Obtaining writing materials from the hotel clerk, he sat down to write a long letter to Mal Lafferty in Yantes, New Mexico, the home town of the late Tom Merritt. Briefly he outlined to Lafferty the developments that had taken place since he left Yantes in Tom Merritt's company, but gave a detailed description of Les Dakin, of his daughter, Myrna, and of his discovering the name "Lucy Tarbell Merritt" on the fly-leaf of the Bible in the Lazy Y ranchhouse.

The letter written, Yorke took it to the local post office in the Lodestone general store. The widow postmistress assured him that the letter would be posted early the next morning by stage.

A WEEK passed, and Yorke's patience was becoming badly frayed. But he realized that it probably would be at least another week before he could possibly hear from Mal Lafferty. And he heard nothing more of Les Dakin and Silver Bend until he happened into the El Capitan one evening. He was agreeably surprised to find the old prospector, Alf Winters, leaning against the bar.

Winters grasped Yorke's arm and led him to a corner table where they sat down.

"Pardner," the old man said excitedly, "it looks like this Les Dakin's race is plumb run! I jest been Silver Bend way a spell—and Dakin's sold out his Juanita saloon. Not only that, but they're sayin' he's got the Lazy Y on the market for a quick sale!"

The news startled Yorke. This development rather upset his plans. Dakin was now apt to clear out for parts unknown before a report came from Mal Lafferty. Yorke was startled when the old prospector suddenly guffawed loudly.

"What's ticklin' yuh, old-timer?" asked Yorke, surprised.

"Jest wonderin'," chuckled the old man. "Jest wonderin' how Dakin's gang is goin' to take his runnin' out on 'em—if that's what he aims to do."

"They won't like it, huh?" Yorke laughed.

"Not none," old Winters said positively. "They been talkin' nasty-like, a-ready, I hear."

Grant Yorke fell thoughtfully silent and old Alf Winters finally drifted back to the bar. A half-hour later, Yorke left the saloon with determined step.

EARLY next morning he squared his hotel bill, breakfasted, then went to the town livery. Ten minutes later he rode casually out of Lodestone in the direction of Silver Bend. No matter what the danger might be to himself, he had decided that he couldn't risk Les Dakin slipping into unknown parts. If Dakin hightailed it—well, Grant Yorke would be pressing hard on his trail.

Timing his arrival Yorke reached the Lazy Y ranchhouse at midnight. He was surprised to find it ablaze with lights. A score of saddled horses stood in the yard. Apparently some kind of a meeting was being held in the house. That was something that needed further investigation and Grant Yorke decided to risk it.

Hitching the palomino to a brush clump, he cautiously approached the house. In the shadow of some shrubbery he peered warily through an open, curtained window into the living room. Some twenty men either stood about or sat around the big mahogany table in the center of the room.

At the head of the table sat Les Dakin, scowling darkly. At Dakin's right sat a Mexican who was talking sharply. Pedro Vellez, guessed Yorke; Les Dakin's chief lieutenant.

Yorke scowled, too. For he was recalling the dying Red Drake's response to his asking who had killed Tom Merritt. "You—you ask Pedro Vellez," Drake had whispered sardonically. "And I'll be waitin' in hell for yuh to tell me what he said. *Sabe?*"

"Eet ees like thees," Pedro Vellez was now saying to Dakin. Through the open window Yorke could hear him distinctly. "You weel 'ave plenty money, when you sell thees place. But us"—he shrugged his shoulders eloquently and waved a hand toward the others about the table, listening intently—"we are not so fortunate. We 'ave no money at all, for you 'ave been ver' squeamish lately. Why thees squeamishment we cannot guess, for never 'ave theengs looked better for the plucking."

Pedro Vellez paused and cast a brooding eye over the assemblage. Narrow-set, restless black eyes and thin, cruelly curved lips gave him a rapacious, dangerous look. A bad customer, decided the watching Yorke.

Les Dakin shifted uneasily in his chair.

"If you boys haven't held on to yore *dinero* that's yore hard luck, not mine," he said irritably. "As for my reasons for pullin' out—they're none of yore business. I've sold the saloon, and the ranch is bein' sold this week to the Tucson Land Development Company. I'm figgerin' on pullin' my freight this comin' Saturday." He pushed back his chair and rose. "I reckon that's all. *Buenos noches,* senors."

Pedro Vellez leaped to his feet. "*Dios!*" he rasped. "You cannot leave us like thees!" Menace glinted in his angry black eyes.

Dakin whirled upon his chief lieutenant. His eyes bored into those of Vellez but the Mexican's gaze held steady. Yorke thought he detected a trace of uneasiness in Dakin's manner. He wasn't surprised when the Lazy Y owner's gaze wavered, nor when the man reluctantly sat down again. Dakin had scented bitter rebellion and had quickly run up the white flag.

"Well," sneered Dakin, "what yuh want of me? A pension?"

"Pensions, no," Vellez said coldly. "What we want is a chance to grubstake. The Silver Bend bank's gold shipment to Tucson on next Saturday would feex us all up ver' good."

Dakin's face clouded. "That's out," he muttered. "Too risky. Killin's would be bound to happen. *Sabe?*"

"What difference?" retorted the Mexican maliciously. "Killings are new to us—to you?"

YORKE smiled grimly from his vantage point as Dakin gave the Mexican a venomous glance.

"I said that gold shipment is out," growled Dakin. "Is that plain?"

"Not as plain as thees," Vellez sneered. "Eet ees not out. We 'ave already decided to 'ave the bank shipment. And we 'ave decided that you help us. You can find out the time of the shipment, how beeg eet ees, an' how many guards there weel be. We need to know thees theengs, Senor Dakin. We *weel* know them! *Sabe?*"

Dakin stared hard and long at the Mexican, but presently signaled grudging assent. What he had read in Vellez' eyes had quickly melted his stubborness. He agreed to engineer the robbing of the bank shipment on Saturday. A heavy depositor of the bank, he would use his connections to learn the size of the shipment, the time of its leaving for Tucson, and the number of guards assigned to it.

Presently Vellez whispered into Dakin's ear and left the room. Yorke decided he had learned all he could and that it would be highly dangerous to eavesdrop longer with the Mexican out of sight.

As he retreated from the house the sound of a feminine voice reached him. He halted, listening. It was Myrna speaking, vehemently protesting in low tones. A harsh masculine voice answered. Yorke found himself being drawn irresistibly toward the voices which came from the ranchhouse veranda.

Crouching, Yorke saw Myrna and a man silhouetted against the veranda gloom. She seemed to be fending off the man, who was speaking in a low, passionate voice.

"Behave yourself, Pedro!" Myrna was saying, desperation in her voice. "Or shall I be forced to tell Father?"

Pedro Vellez laughed grossly. "*Caramba!* What I care for your father? Come, give Pedro a leetle kees!"

Of a sudden he eluded the girl's fending arms and grasped her tightly about the waist. A muffled scream from Myrna sent Yorke into action.

(Continued on page 103)

Renegade's Choice

Testing Him by Thirst and Burning Sands, the Desert Takes the Measure of Bill Tillery!

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "Boothill Dare," "Stampeder's Code," etc.

Sheriff Jim Gaunt

TWO tiny specks in that sere, heat-lashed world of powdery sand and twisted cacti, they staggered on and on. The wind washed in slow, scorching gusts over them. The drifting sand filled their eyes, ground into their skin and burned like molten liquid. The sun was like a giant blow-torch in the brassy sky.

Bill Tillery looked at the raw-boned, grey-mustached man with a star on his chest who reeled along beside him, and cursed slowly, tonelessly. Handcuffed to death!

"Wasn't satisfied with dyin' yoreself, yuh had to take me with yuh," he said bitterly. "What the hell was the idea of handcuffin' our wrists together and throwin' the key away?"

"Yuh're my prisoner, Tillery," Sheriff Jim Gaunt mumbled harshly. "Yuh're wanted back in Gunpowder Flats, for murder. Yuh busted outa jail, so it's my duty to take yuh back."

"But yuh can't do it," Bill Tillery said impatiently. "The nearest waterhole is ten miles across this desert, and yuh can't last half that far. Yuh know that, don't yuh?"

"No, I don't know that," the sheriff denied stubbornly.

"I know it! But I'm not so bad as you are. I could make it to Gypsum Springs, if I wasn't handcuffed to yuh."

"That's jest the reason I done it," the old lawman said grimly. "We live or die—together. If I take yuh back to Gunpowder Flats yuh'll be tried for murder. Yuh deserve to hang, if yuh've done jest half the things yuh're accused of doin'."

"That's jest it," Bill Tillery said bitterly. "I'm not guilty of half the things they say I am. Because the law wanted me, a lot of things have been laid off on me. I killed some of old Jake Talley's cows, all right. But you know how that was. There was a waterhole on the line between

my little outfit and his big Double O. We'd both always used the water. But last summer, when the dry spell come, old Jake fenced the hole and said it was on Double O land. That threw me out of water. My cows was dyin'. I musta gone crazy, seein' my stuff starve that way, when jest a fence stood between them and water. So I told Jake Talley that for every critter of mine that died, I'd kill one of his—and started in to do it. So old Jake had me jailed.

"But I broke outa jail and took to the owl-hoot. Doin' that was a crazy thing, I know that now. For, after that, I was accused of half the things that happened in the country. If a lone gent robbed a stage, they said it was me done it; if a store was broke into, I done that too. It was the same way when somebody broke into old Gabe Trawley's store that night, and shot him down when he happened along. But I was fifty miles from Gunpowder Flats that night.

"I killed some cows. And when I got hungry, I stole. Do I deserve to hang for them things?"

"That ain't for me to say," Jim Gaunt said flatly. "I've got my duty to do, and I aim to do it. Keep walkin'!"

Heads lowered against the scorching blasts of wind and sand, they reeled on across the desert. Both doomed to a slow, horrible death, just because of a queer quirk in Sheriff Jim Gaunt's brain that made him think of duty when he faced eternity. Bill Tillery's lips twisted ironically. The law's injustice had corroded his soul with bitterness and hate—but he wasn't ready to die.

He was weak from thirst and weariness, but Sheriff Gaunt was still worse off. Bill knew that the tough old man-hunter could never make it to Gypsum Springs. And yet, just because Gaunt couldn't make it, they would both die. Several hours before, their horses had dropped from exhaustion. And, through a ruse, the sheriff had handcuffed himself to his prisoner.

Jim Gaunt was a bulldog sort of man. He had a reputation for toughness back in Gunpowder Flats. He fiercely hated men who wilfully broke the law. Folks said he would hang his own brother without batting an eye, if he deserved to be hanged. Now Bill Tillery knew that the old sheriff was just as hard and tough as he'd heard he was. He didn't give a damn whether or not the gent he aimed to hang was guilty.

Jim Gaunt stumbled suddenly, went to his knees. Grimly contemptuous of Tillery's offer of aid, he fought back to his feet.

"Old desert's 'bout got me licked," he muttered. "I can't last much longer."

"Yuh jest now findin' that out?" Bill Tillery asked harshly. "But I'm good for ten miles yet. What's the use of us both dyin'? If yuh hadn't throwed that key away—"

THEY went on, at a maddening snail's pace. Tillery knew that each passing moment brought him nearer to death. His own tongue had begun to swell. Thirst was clamping his throat with merciless fingers. The blazing sun and powdery sand gouged like hot needles at his face and hands.

Gaunt stumbled again, went down, and this time it took him longer to get up. Bill Tillery cursed him with impatient helplessness, hardly realizing what he did, and looked up at the half dozen buzzards that wheeled in slow circles overhead. Ghastly symbols of death, the scavengers had been following them for the last several hours.

Soon, Tillery knew their grisly patience would be rewarded. Then they'd flap to the sand beside two sprawled, motionless figures, and

peck with foul, greedy beaks at their eyes.

Jim Gaunt looked up and saw the vultures, too, and croaked harsh curses at them. The knowledge of lurking death seemed to give him renewed strength.

Side by side, wrists locked, they fought their way across the burning desert toward Gypsum Springs. Now the life-giving water was six miles away—now four—

But Sheriff Jim Gaunt couldn't make it. Half a dozen times he'd fought doggedly to his feet. But now he couldn't get up. They both knew it.

Bill Tillery looked down at the beaten lawman, sprawled motionlessly on the hot sand, bitter defeat in his own eyes. Jim Gaunt stared back at him, but now his flinty eyes were no longer cold with defiance and determination. In them was the acknowledgement of final defeat, the admission that the desert had won this last savage battle.

"I'm licked, Tillery," he whispered huskily. "I can't go another step. I won't see yuh hang after all!"

There was pity in Bill Tillery's eyes as he looked down at Jim Gaunt. Gaunt had meant to hang him. But he couldn't hate the old lawman now, even though Jim Gaunt's weakness meant his own doom. He knew he could never carry the sheriff's unconscious body the remaining distance across the flaming desert to Gypsum Springs. They'd both die.

Through the wild thoughts that seethed in his brain he heard Gaunt's words.

"I don't want to die with murder on my soul," the sheriff was saying softly. "I fooled yuh, Tillery. I didn't throw that key away. Look in my left vest pocket—"

BILL TILLERY reeled on across the desert. Alone, now. He didn't look back at the motionless figure of Jim Gaunt. Fierce triumph stormed through him. He was free! He'd make it to Gypsum Springs, fill the empty canteen that was slung on his shoulder, and strike south for old Mexico. Bill Tillery laughed, a little wildly, and shook his fist savagely at the buzzards that were whirling in lowering circles in the sky behind him.

The red sun was sinking down toward the corrugated desert rim by now. The wind had stopped, and the basin was still, silent, sinister. Once, Tillery looked back. He couldn't see Jim Gaunt now, but he could see the buzzards as they hovered only a few feet above the ground and peered down with avid, vulturine eyes.

Bill Tillery cursed softly, stopped. But after a moment of indecision, he went on again. He couldn't help the big man-hunter by going back. They'd just both die. All this was Gaunt's fault. Let him suffer the consequences.

Gypsum Springs lay suddenly before him, in a little sink in the desert. Just a shallow pool of scummy, alkaline water — but it tasted sweet and heavenly to Bill Tillery. He drank slowly, glorying in the lukewarm wetness of the liquid. Then he filled his canteen, preparatory to continuing on across the Border.

The sun was setting in a wild blaze of colors. But the air was still hot, stifling. Soon night would cool the air, though. Bill Tillery grinned as he thought about how pleasant it would be walking through the night, with plenty of water to drink, toward Mexico—and safety.

Then a sudden dark thought wiped the grin from his lips. He thought about Jim Gaunt, lying back there on the hot sand, dying slowly of thirst. He felt the weight of the canteen in his hand, and cursed softly. A man dying of thirst—while he had plenty of water!

The law said Bill Tillery was a killer, and had placed a price on his head. If the law caught up with him again, he'd hang. It didn't matter that his exile was a bitter injustice; the law would hang him just the same. But lanky, tawny-haired Bill Tillery had always lived by his own iron creed of fair play.

He stood there beside the waterhole, his eyes tortured by uncertainty. He hated Jim Gaunt, he told himself. He knew that the tough old bounty hunter didn't expect anything from him. He expected only death. He'd let Bill Tillery go, given him his life, knowing that he himself was about to die. Maybe Jim Gaunt wasn't such a hell of a bad gent, after all.

Bill Tillery stared back across the shadowy desert. He couldn't see even the buzzards now. But he knew they were there. Tillery's lips tightened grimly as a picture of what might be happening there flashed through his mind. That would be a devilish way for a man to die.

ALL at once, Tillery knew he couldn't let even a bounty hunter like Jim Gaunt die like that. If Sheriff Gaunt had barred his path to freedom, a gun in his hand, Bill Tillery would have killed him without regret. But there was a hell of a difference in killing a gent who had a gun in his fist and in standing by and watching him die when he could stop it.

Canteen slung across his shoulder, Tillery started running back across the desert. The shadows deepened, then a white moon soared into the sky, pointing the way with silvery fingers.

Bill Tillery cursed harshly as several buzzards flapped with hissing croaks from the ground beside Jim Gaunt's body, and ran forward. Jim Gaunt was conscious; he'd been waiting resignedly for death. He stared up at Bill Tillery with feverish eyes.

Tillery lifted Jim Gaunt's head, held the canteen to his lips. He let the sheriff drink sparingly, and watched with a queer, exalted feeling the miracle of new life and strength flowing through Gaunt's starved body.

Jim Gaunt lay without speaking a moment, his craggy face somber in the moonlight as he looked up at Bill Tillery. Then Jim Gaunt moved, and Tillery saw the gleam of a gun in his hand. Bill Tillery's lips curled with bitter contempt as he looked at the gun.

Jim Gaunt got slowly to his knees, the gun outthrust.

"Easy, Tillery," he rapped huskily. "I know what yuh're thinkin'. Yuh're thinkin' I'd be a skunk to take yuh back to stand trial for murder, after what yuh jest done, ain't yuh?"

"I don't expect any favors from yuh," Bill Tillery said with slow contempt. "I was jest a damn fool for not takin' yore gun before I let yuh drink. Well, yuh've got me. What now?"

"Folks say I'm hard, Tillery," Jim Gaunt went on levelly. "They say I'm a human law-machine, without any sense of feelin'. They say I like to kill law-breakers, jest for the thrill of seein' 'em kick. But they're wrong. I jest aim to do my duty, as I see it."

"That's fine." Bill Tillery grinned bitterly. "But I don't need a sermon."

Jim Gaunt holstered his gun. Bill Tillery could have leaped upon him then, and smashed him to the ground. But he didn't do it. He didn't know what kept him from it. He looked at Jim Gaunt, and saw that the old sheriff was smiling a little.

"Yuh've jest done a hell of a big thing, Tillery," Jim Gaunt said softly. "Yuh've jest give a man his life, when it woulda meant a lot more to yuh the other way. A gent who would rather give life than take it,

can't be a killer. I don't think yuh murdered old Gabe Trawley, or done them other things."

"So?" Bill Tillery sneered.

"So I aim to find out if I'm wrong. I could let yuh go free, Tillery. I could go back to Gunpowder Flats and tell folks yuh was dead, that I buried yuh out here in the desert. My word has never been doubted—it wouldn't be doubted if I told 'em that. Then yuh'd be free, no longer an outlaw. You *sabe*, Tillery?"

A stunned feeling had come over Bill Tillery. "Yuh mean—yuh'd do that—jest because I brought yuh I allus aim to do my duty, as I see it. It'd be my duty to pick the jury that tried yuh. And if I do say it, I've got a right smart pull around Gunpowder Flats. I've got enough money to hire the best lawyer in Arizona. Mebbe that wouldn't be enough. Mebbe the jury I'd pick would convict yuh—and again, mebbe they wouldn't. It's jest a gamble. There they lay, Bill Tillery—play 'em like yuh see fit!"

Jim Gaunt unlocked the manacles that were still on his wrists, flung them across the sand. Then he turned abruptly and walked slowly

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

See whether yuh kin savvy th' replies tuh these five questions. Answers are on Page 113, if yuh cain't—but DON'T LOOK BEFORE TRYING.

1. What does a coyote signify to a Navajo Indian?
2. What does the term "buck fever" mean?
3. What did the initials G. T. mean on a police record?
4. Who was John Slaughter?
5. What is the original meaning of the word rodeo?

that water?" he asked bewilderedly.

Jim Gaunt shook his grizzled head. "You bringin' me that water wouldn't make a bit of difference, if I thought yuh was guilty. But I don't—I think yuh're a hell of a fine man. And that's why I don't want to do what I jest said. I'm gittin' old, Bill, and I aim to retire after this term of office expires. I've saved up enough money to buy me a little cow outfit over on the edge of the hills. I'll need somebody to help me run it—some gent I'll know is honest and fine and unselfish."

Bill Tillery's mind was spinning. "But—hell, I don't savvy. There'd still be that murder charge against me."

Jim Gaunt nodded. "Like I said, across the desert toward Gypsum Springs.

When he'd gone a hundred feet, he looked back. Bill Tillery still stood there, etched darkly against the moon-washed dunes. His face was just a brown splash in the moonlight, but Jim Gaunt could vision the torment and indecision that was in the big renegade's eyes.

Sheriff Jim Gaunt walked on. Then, after a while, he looked back again. Bill Tillery was walking slowly across the desert, no longer undecided, his step firm. Jim Gaunt stopped, and Tillery came up with him.

Side by side, they went on through the desert night. In Bill Tillery's heart was fresh hope and a new-found peace. Jim Gaunt was smiling softly.

BANDITS OF SILVER BEND

(Continued from page 97)

He vaulted the veranda railing and sped catlike to the struggling pair. Grasping the Mexican by the collar he flung the fellow against the house.

"Yuh damn coyote," said Yorke icily, hands hovering over the butts of his six-guns. And then step by step he came slowly closer, his eyes boring into the flashing ones of the Mexican. "Who killed Tom Merritt?" he demanded with firm accent on each word.

Vellez swore luridly. His shoulders hunched peculiarly, then his right hand swooped toward his holstered Colt. Yorke smiled in grim triumph as he leaped to one side to keep Myrna out of range, his hands streaking simultaneously for his guns.

Yorke's six-guns spat flame and lead. Vellez, his gun barely clear of its holster, lurched against the house, then sagged to the veranda flooring where he squirmed convulsively, arms wrapped around his middle. It was plain that he had pulled his last trigger.

Shouts and running footsteps sounded inside the house. Yorke felt Myrna tugging frantically at his sleeve.

"Go, for heaven's sake—go!" she begged. "They're all coming out here!" She pushed him toward the veranda railing.

Yorke leaped over the railing and sped into the cover of night. He had gone half the distance to his tethered palomino, when from behind him six-guns belched lead haphazardly into the night. He smiled grimly. Pedro Vellez lay dying. Tom Merritt was avenged upon the hand that had brutally slain him. Les Dakin, the guiding spirit of that hand, would be the next.

Vaulting into saddle, Yorke swung the palomino's head in the direction of Lodestone. There was no sign of

(Continued on page 104)

Sell 19 Features in Six Months

"I have sold, up to date, nineteen features to the Detroit Free Press and have been made their correspondent here," writes Mrs. Leonard Sanders of 218 Union St., Milford, Mich., on completing the N. I. A. course. Her skilful handling of feature stories was the reason given by the editor for her appointment. Mrs. Sanders' first feature was sold less than four months after she enrolled with N. I. A.

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(Continued from page 103)

pursuit. His escape had been so quick that Dakin and his henchmen were uncertain as to the direction in which he had fled.

CHAPTER V

Attempted Holdup

GRANT YORKE reached Lodestone at noon the next day. He ate voraciously in the Mex beanery, then visited the post office. No, said the widow postmistress, there wasn't any mail for him. But, she added, a middle-aged man from New Mexico had been there inquiring about him yesterday. He had left word that he was staying at the hotel.

Yorke hurried to the hotel. So Mal Lafferty had thought that letter important enough to come to Arizona in person! Yorke began to feel that he had guessed right concerning Les Dakin's past.

He found Mal Lafferty in his hotel room, playing double-solitaire with a leathery-visaged stranger. Yorke noted with surprise that a shiny nickel badge gleamed on the stranger's vest.

On greeting him heartily, Mal Lafferty introduced his companion.

"This is Sheriff Bob Hartnett of Yantes, Yorke. He decided yore letter was important enough for him to come here himself, and I tagged along."

"Where is this Les Dakin, as he is called?" asked Sheriff Hartnett.

Yorke told him. The sheriff took several tintypes from a pocket and handed them to Yorke.

"These are pictures of Tom Merritt's brother, Dan, his wife, Lucy, and their little girl, Myrna," he said. "They was taken fifteen years ago. Look 'em over."

Yorke examined the pictures. Dan Merritt closely resembled his brother, Tom. Lucy Merritt was a comely girl but her mouth was weak, petulant. The child was about four years old and pretty. So that was Myrna Dakin as she was fifteen years ago. Poor kid!

Grim thoughts crowded Yorke's mind. He glanced at the sheriff, questioningly.

"Figgered yuh'd be curious," said Hartnett. "Well, if this Les Dakin is the man I think he is, then he was once known as Joel Brame. I want him for the murder o' Dan and Lucy Merritt and the kidnapin' of their little girl, Myrna."

Grant Yorke's eyes opened wide with surprise as the sheriff went on. "This here Brame, or Dakin or whatever he calls himself, roomed in Dan Merritt's home for a time. Lucy Merritt, a plumb foolish girl, went and fell in love with this Brame hombre. One March day they up and leave together, takin' the little girl, Myrna. Dan Merritt like to went loco. He had a hunch about the direction they'd gone—and trailed 'em. Caught up with them near Santa Fé. Dan was armed but he didn't make no move to shoot. He wasn't the shootin' kind.

"Lucy was willing to go back with her husband, but Brame tried to argue her out of it. When he could not, he jest went plumb loco. He pulled a gun and killed both Dan Merritt and Lucy, too. Then he high-tailed it with the kid for parts unknown. I didn't know Tom Merritt had come to Arizona until you both had been gone a week. He musta somehow got wind of the whereabouts of the killer of his brother and sister-in-law. Shore grieves me to think he had to forfeit his life trying to git that skunk." And the sheriff added ominously: "I want to be led to this Les Dakin—pronto!"

"That won't be hard," said Yorke, with a short laugh. "But first I've

got some other news that'll mebbe interest yuh."

He proceeded to tell Hartnett and Lafferty of the results of his visit to the Lazy Y on the previous evening, and all he had overheard.

"We can't let that robbery go through!" Sheriff Hartnett exclaimed. "We should make a good job of it and nab the whole gang while we're 'bout it."

"Yuh're thinkin' my way," said Yorke shortly. "But you and Lafferty gotta lay the groundwork. You don't know it yet, Sheriff, nor you neither, Mal, but"—he smiled wryly—"I'm a wanted man. That bunch o' coyotes been tryin' to make out *I* killed Tom Merritt—worst frame-up yuh ever saw. Tell yuh all about it later and how come I hightailed, but there ain't time now. I suggest yuh ride to Tucson and git the sheriff there to round up a posse for yuh. Mal, you kin ease into Silver Bend and tip off the bank fellers there about the planned robbery. Tell 'em to let the shipment go as scheduled—but with plenty of guards hid up inside the stage. Savvy?"

Lafferty and Hartnett nodded.

"Today is Wednesday and the robbery is to come off Saturday morning, uh?" Lafferty said. "That means we gotta work plumb fast."

It was decided that Yorke should stay at Lodestone until the last minute, then join Hartnett with the Tucson posse at the point where the Silver Bend-Tucson trail crossed Silver Creek—the most likely spot for the robbery to be attempted. An hour later Lafferty and Hartnett departed on their missions, riding hired mounts, and Grant Yorke set about possessing his soul in patience until the time for action came.

FRIDAY night Grant Yorke rode out of Lodestone to keep his rendezvous with the Tucson posse.

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 105)

As he rode he thought much of Myrna Dakin—or Myrna Merritt as he now knew her to be — and her strange plight. Her father and mother slain by the man she had called father for fifteen years! What a conscienceless cur Les Dakin was! Even thought of the man caused Yorke's palms to itch for the ivory butts of his six-guns.

WITH the dawn of Saturday he reached Silver Creek. At the point where the trail crossed the creek there was a thick cluster of cottonwoods, sufficient cover for twenty to thirty horsemen. The ford was difficult, making it an ideal spot for a stage robbery. Yorke felt certain that he had been right in his belief that Dakin had selected this spot as the scene of the proposed holdup of the bank shipment.

At eight o'clock a large group of horsemen rode into sight from the direction of Tucson. A quarter of a mile from the ford they veered from the trail and vanished into a deep arroyo. Shortly a rider appeared in the opposite direction. Yorke grinned. Mal Lafferty was riding from Silver Bend to join the posse.

"Howdy!" was Lafferty's cheery greeting as he rode up to where Yorke waited. "Stage is due at this ford at ten sharp. Where's the posse?"

Yorke indicated the arroyo into which the posse had vanished. "Waiting for us over there."

They rode to the arroyo, dismounted, and were greeted warmly by Sheriff Hartnett and a short, thin, wiry man whom he introduced as Sheriff Ike Brannigan of Pima County. The latter's calm, childlike blue eyes studied Yorke intently.

"Grant Yorke, huh?" he said. "Well, yuh're under technical arrest for murder. Savvy?"

Yorke nodded, grinning. "Here's hopin' it won't stick. Not after we git through this day's work."

There was no time to say more, for at that moment came a hail from a lookout posseman stationed at the arroyo mouth. Horsemen sighted. Yorke and the two sheriffs hastened to a vantage point. From their hiding places the possemen could shortly see horsemen deploying from several directions, converging at the creek ford. Then they disappeared into the clump of cottonwood. Yorke counted twenty riders, Les Dakin among them.

"There's likely to be killin's," said Sheriff Ike Brannigan soberly. "I'd like to keep from that, if we could, but to rush them hombres now wouldn't help matters none. If they didn't put up a fight — well we wouldn't have nothing against 'em. We'd jest have to let 'em go scot free. As for Les Dakin, he'd hightail soon as he'd see us and probably git plumb away. Better wait. Swoop down on 'em while they're plenty interested with the stage."

The wait for the stage was tedious, but finally it appeared far down the trail toward Silver Bend, bowling lazily along. An armed mounted guard rode on either side. An armed messenger rode beside the driver.

THE posse in the arroyo tensely watched the scene, prepared to ride to the kill or capture at a moment's notice.

The stage lumbered to the ford. The horses plunged into the shallow water. Suddenly the armed mounted guards beside the stage opened rifle fire into the clump of cottonwoods on the opposite bank. Immediately there came an answering fire from the concealed bandits. One mounted stage guard swayed crazily in saddle and toppled into the churning creek waters. From inside the stage came a sudden, withering blast of fire from

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)

the planted guards of the bank shipment. The posse in the arroyo, thirty strong, swung into saddles.

"All right, boys!" shouted Sheriff Brannigan. "Here's where we send 'em to hell or the penitentiary! Ride!"

The posse swept forward, bent on flanking the bandits and hemming them between two fires. Yorke kept a sharp eye out for Les Dakin. Presently he spied the man, astride a fleet-limbed black stallion.

Dakin was shouting to his hard-pressed men as he whirled his horse about. He rode at a dizzy pace paral-

leling the creek. His men, stunned by his precipitate flight, quickly scattered, riding desperately for freedom with the possemen hot at their heels.

Yorke headed his palomino in Dakin's wake. As he crossed the creek, Yorke saw that he was alone in the pursuit of Dakin and grimly congratulated himself. He wanted the man for his own. The rough going favored the surer-footed palomino, and Yorke began to grow exultant as he saw that he was slowly but surely closing in on Dakin.

Dakin rode a circuitous course—one that told Grant Yorke the man's objective was the Lazy Y ranch. Yorke spurred the palomino to its utmost speed. He wanted—he *must*—capture Les Dakin before the man reached the ranchhouse and Myrna!

But to Yorke's chagrin the country leveled out and Dakin's black stallion showed its true worth. And it was not long until Yorke found himself being out-distanced.

CHAPTER VI

Trail End

DAKIN reached the Lazy Y ranchhouse a mile in advance of his pursuer. As Yorke rode after him hell-bent, he saw the man leap from the black and run to where a pair of restive mustangs stood hitched to a buckboard near the corral. A girl came running from the house. Myrna! Dakin lifted her to the buckboard seat, leaped up beside her. Yorke was a quarter of a mile from the buckboard as the mustangs whirled it into the trail, headed for Silver Bend.

The mustangs were fresh and Yorke despaired of his fast-tiring palomino overtaking them. However, he doggedly kept to the chase.

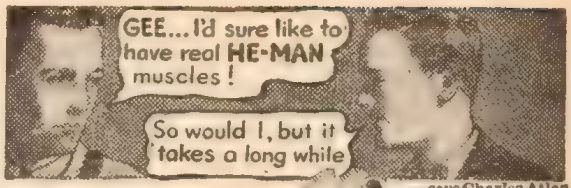
But Dakin had no intention of driving to Silver Bend. This quickly became apparent when the buckboard careened dizzily from the trail into another which wound a tortuous course southward. Dakin was Old Mexico bound, decided Yorke. And with each passing minute he was becoming more worried about his chances of heading the man off.

Suddenly Yorke swerved sharply from the trail to his right, and rode with a prayer on his lips that the palomino wouldn't falter during the next ten minutes. He soon lost sight of the buckboard which rocked crazily along the winding, often hazardous trail.

His objective was a point beyond a sharp bend in the trail—a short cut that would undoubtedly close the distance between him and the buckboard. The going was hard but the palomino took it nobly. And on heart alone, Yorke realized with a surge of pity for the faithful animal.

Yorke thrilled with satisfaction as he reached the trail again ahead of

(Continued on page 110)



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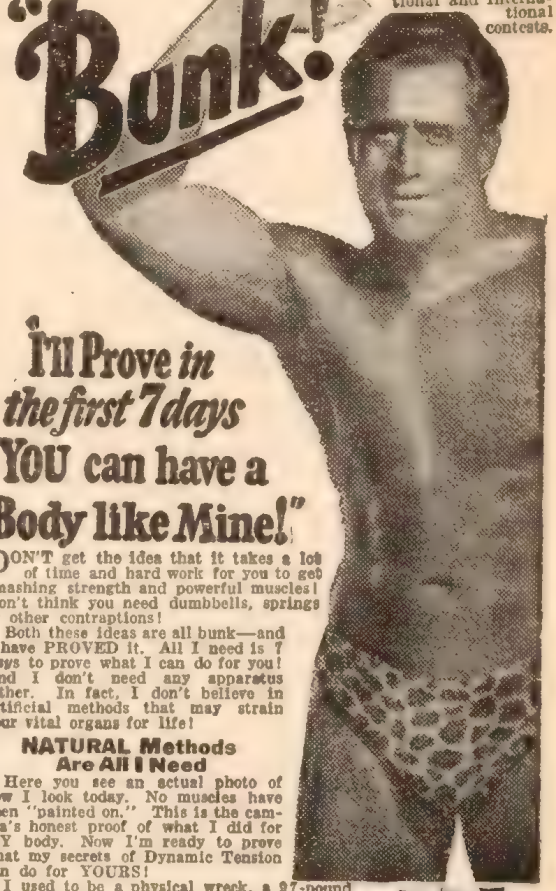

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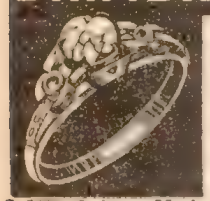

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(Continued from page 109)

the buckboard! But the thrill died as he flung himself from the saddle. The palomino stood with trembling legs wide spread and head sagging, blown.

Cursing the necessity which had forced him to sacrifice the noble animal, Yorke ran to the trail edge. Not a moment too soon. For the next instant the buckboard lurched into sight.

Catapulting himself into the trail Grant Yorke made a flying leap to the neck of the nearest racing mustang. The team came to a slithering halt as Yorke yanked a six-gun from a holster and whirled around toward the buckboard. The driver's seat was empty!

Then he saw Dakin and Myrna. The man was backing off the trail into the thick brush flanking it, holding the girl as a shield before him. And surprise came to Yorke when he saw that Dakin's right hand held a bowie knife instead of a six-gun. Apparently the boss of the Lazy Y had run out of ammunition and had discarded his gun. This realization emboldened Yorke. He ran toward the retreating pair. But he jerked to an abrupt halt as Dakin shouted harshly:

"Stand where yuh are, or I'll—"

Dakin didn't finish. He didn't need to, for the bowie knife was significantly pointed at the back of the girl whom he held tightly about the waist with a powerful arm. Myrna seemed unaware of her peril.

Yorke swore in bitter chagrin. Dakin was playing his last trump, and Grant Yorke was forced to admit it looked like the winning card. There was no question at all in Grant Yorke's mind that Dakin would kill Myrna should he, Yorke, attempt to close in. His six-guns sagged in his hands and his mind sought swiftly for a way to check-

mate Dakin, now thirty paces distant and backing steadily.

A heart-beat later, peculiar rasping sounds struck Yorke's ears. He stiffened and paled as he placed the sounds. They came from just behind Dakin and Myrna.

"Don't back another step!" he shouted hoarsely to the pair. But Dakin snarled a savage curse in reply, and continued his retreat.

Cold perspiration gathering upon his brow, Yorke shivered in terrible anticipation. Then grim purpose darkened his face. The six-gun in his right hand leveled at the hate-contorted face of Dakin over Myrna's left shoulder.

The peculiar rasping sounds were louder now and seemingly came from directly beneath the feet of the retreating pair.

YORKE'S trigger finger jerked. Myrna screamed. Dakin stiffened to his full height, a little spurt of crimson jetting from a small hole which had appeared over his left eye.

Yorke sprinted forward. He jerked Myrna free of the lifeless arm imprisoning her. Then he made a desperate effort to prevent the bandit leader's body from slipping into a deep, brush-screened pit, but to no avail. Dakin's body crashed out of sight.

Yorke felt suddenly sick as the rasping sounds redoubled, then trebled in volume. He glanced into the pit, then spun dizzily on heel. Thank God the man was dead! He knew that thereafter he would never be able to bear the sight of a rattlesnake.

Myrna was staring at him dazedly.

"Where's Father?" she asked piteously. "You didn't—kill him, did you?"

Yorke could not look at her for

(Continued on page 112)

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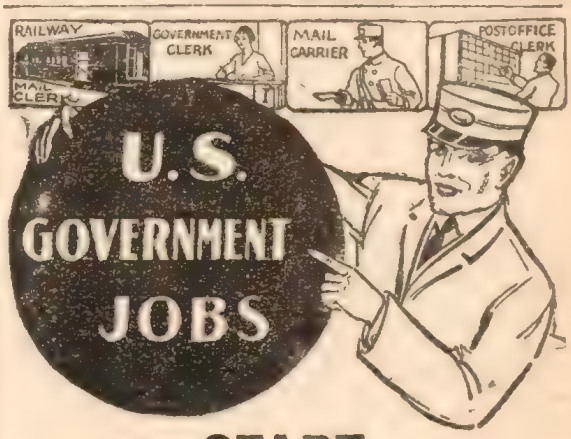

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(Continued from page 111)

the life of him. All he could manage was:

"He wasn't yore father, Myrna. Yore real father and mother are both dead—died fifteen years ago by the hand of the man yuh've always thought was yore father."

She stared at him blankly. "Not my Father? What—" She broke off abruptly as a large group of riders pounded up.

Yorke sighed in relief. The newcomers were Sheriffs Brannigan and Hartnett, with the posse. He decided to let Sheriff Hartnett explain things to Myrna. He knew he himself was totally unfit for such an ordeal.

On learning of the events which had preceded the death of Dakin, the New Mexican sheriff took Myrna to one side and told her the sordid life-story of the man she had known as her father for fifteen years. Sheriff Brannigan and his men rescued the trapped body of Les Dakin with an expertly tossed lariat loop. They gave it a decent burial nearby.

A half hour later Yorke felt a touch at his shoulder. He turned to find Mal Lafferty at his side.

"Myrna wants to see yuh, lad," said the grizzled former gun-fighter. "She's walkin' down the trail a piece. Be easy with her. She's had a hard day. And listen, cowboy. They won't be any arrestin' o' you. Some o' them hombres we grabbed was plumb glad to tell them two sheriffs the whole works 'bout how Tom Merritt was killed. Poor Tom!"

Yorke nodded and mumbled thanks. He started down the trail. He found Myrna walking slowly, head bowed.

"Myrna," he called gently. She stopped and turned. Her eyes were dry but he read unutterable pain in their brown depths.

"Yuh've been told everything?" he asked hesitantly.

Myrna nodded. "Everything," she

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said in a low voice. "And I'm terribly sorry for the way I've treated you, Grant."

The sound of his given name on Myrna's lips caused Yorke's heart to quicken its beat.

"Myrna," he said earnestly, "mebbe I shouldn't say what I am goin' to say at a time like this—but I'm naturally a tactless cuss. You know, of course, that the Lazy Y has been sold and that yuh gotta find yoreself another home. Do yuh like ranch life?"

"Yes," said Myrna simply. "But where would I be able to go to?"

Yorke flushed and fidgeted nervously. "Oh—er—the spread where I'm goin' to be tophand and boss," he said huskily.

"What spread is that?" asked Myrna quietly.

Yorke took a deep breath and, studiously avoiding Myrna's questioning brown eyes, he said hurriedly:

"Honest, I don't know jest yet myownself, but it'll be a pretty nice place. I got quite a pile of *dinero* laid aside and I aim to live a quiet, respectable cowman's life hereafter. No more gun-guardin' for me. I done had a whole plenty."

Myrna smiled, her sadness lifting visibly. "Is this a proposal?" she demanded softly.

Yorke's face felt uncomfortably warm, but he managed to nod assent. The next instant he found one hundred and ten pounds of loveliness in his arms. He didn't know exactly how it had happened. He didn't care to know. The fact was satisfaction enough. Both Myrna and the world were his now.

Answers to Questions on Page 102

1. Bad luck. 2. An attack of nervousness which is felt by hunters when their game comes in sight. Often the game escapes as a result. 3. "Gone to Texas." Outlaws found sanctuary there before Texas entered the Union. 4. One of the greatest law-enforcement officers of the old West, and a Texas Ranger. 5. It is a Mexican word which originally meant a roundup.

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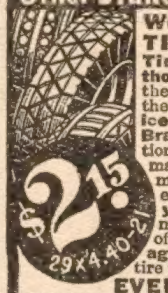

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28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
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31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
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30x5	$4.25	$1.95
33x5	3.95	1.75
34x5	4.25	2.25
32x6	7.95	2.95
36x6	9.95	4.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
34x4½	3.45	1.45
30x5	3.65	1.65
33x5	3.75	1.75
35x5	3.95	1.75
34x7	$10.95	$4.65
38x7	10.95	4.65
36x8	11.48	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
6.50-20	4.45	1.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95
ALL OTHER SIZES		

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.50-20	$6.95	$3.75
8.25-20	8.95	4.95
9.00-20	10.95	5.65
9.75-20	13.95	6.45

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SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. ($3.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED

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☐ Building Estimating	☐ Telegraph Engineer	☐ Air Conditioning and Cooling	☐ Chemistry
☐ Contractor and Builder	☐ Telephone Work ☐ Radio	☐ Steam Engineer	☐ Pharmacy
☐ Structural Draftsman	☐ Mechanical Engineering	☐ Steam Electric Engineer	☐ Coal Mining
☐ Structural Engineer	☐ Mechanical Draftsman	☐ Marine Engineer	☐ Mine Foreman ☐ Fire Bosses
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☐ Electrical Engineer	☐ Patternmaker	☐ R. R. Section Foreman	☐ Cotton Manufacturing
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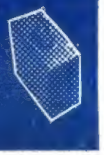

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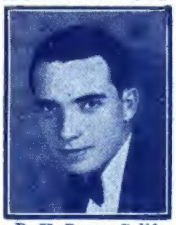

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